

“The Favor of God”

When Ellisa and I were in law school, we became close friends with a law student who was about ten years older than we were. He was a third- year student when we started out. He was about thirty-five years old and his wife was in her early forties (Ellis and I were in our mid-twenties). He had a great sense of humor and both he and his wife have always been fun to be around. They introduced us to our favorite Greek and pizza place in the world, Zorbas in Irmo, SC. We also used to go over to their home a lot where they gave us good home-cooked meals. They were very instrumental in convincing me that Ellisa and I were meant for each other!

They had tried for several years to have children with no success. She was forty-two and was told it was unlikely that she would ever get pregnant. Fertility treatments were not an option. They kept trying, not giving up. Then one summer after our second year of law school, Ellisa called me and told me that our friend’s wife was pregnant. A miracle! The pregnancy went fine and a beautiful daughter was born. Their oldest daughter is now thirty-four and has worked for several years as a school teacher in the Lexington School district number five. They then had another daughter two years later. She ended up going to the Citadel, joined the

navy, and sailed on ships for a while. She is now married and lives in the Washington, DC area.

As wonderful as this story may be, it still does not hold a candle to the news that we receive in our scripture reading today. The story of God, Mary, and the angel still creates “awesome wonder.” This is the news that God is changing our understanding of our own and the world’s salvation history.

When we first look at Luke 1:26-38, our focus is on Mary. Yet, when our vision sharpens, we realize that this passage is far more about God’s work, rather than who or what Mary is. Here is God interrupting the normal routines of life. God has been silent for long years, some four hundred, silent, yes, but never absent. Just as God originally spoke creation into existence, the Lord now speaks this creation into a new existence. The world will never be the same.

In today’s scripture passage, we become witnesses to the act of reconciliation, as it begins to unfold, for future generations. This is the beginning of a time of transition that calls the world to move beyond patriarchs, prophets, and worldly kings, beyond self-proclaimed rulers, beyond mere rituals and routines, in order to move into a different and more personal relationship with the one we know as God. A new approach to salvation is established in the story of the Advent visit to Mary.

God begins the selection process, in which the new order will be revealed.

Gabriel is sent to deliver a call upon the life of Mary. She is to play a most important role in this reconciliation process. God will use her to bring divine love to the world in a way that has never been shared. Mary is being called into service that will interrupt her personal plans. No longer will she exist on the margin. Her purpose has changed from the mundane to the special. Isn't it amazing how God chooses Mary, a peasant girl, not one of fame or royalty, for the primary work in the manifestation of his earthly kingdom.

This masterful story of God's placing a mortal woman at the center of events weaves in the thought that we humans matter, as the history of God's salvation unfolds. Each one of us desires to matter, to be chosen. We wait to be invited to be on the team, a part of the group. We wait to be invited to "that" party, that special event. It's human nature to want to be considered a part of something that we find worthy. This woman is being offered a call that supersedes all invitations.

On the one hand I can see Mary being happy that God has noticed her and found favor with her. Yet, on the other hand, she is bound to wonder, "Why me?" God has pulled her from the margins of society and given her new purpose. No longer will she be on the sidelines but on the frontline of God's reconciling work. She has to be scared as well. She finds that living in "The Favor of God" has its

challenges. Everyone wants to be chosen but who wants to stick out like a sore thumb. Or, in other words, who wants to sacrifice what's known for the scary unknown?

Mary was changed from being a traditional betrothed woman to one who would stand out in society and history. Sometimes, God offers us a new way of bearing witness to his affirmation of the journey ahead, even when we are not sure of our own ability. We might ask the same question that Mary asked after she was visited by the angel Gabriel, *How will this be?*

Sometimes, God offers us a new way of bearing witness to his affirmation of the journey ahead, even when we are not sure of our own ability. God's call upon our lives breaks the barriers of self-understanding and worth to a new way of looking at self. There is that affirmation of being chosen by a winning coach on the never losing team. In the shifting of our new understanding of self, we are never alone, into the walk of the call. As we ask how we are going to do it, we must always remember God's promises. God is with us. That's a promise, as Jesus said, "*Lo, I shall be with you always.*" (Matthew 28:20).

God offers encouragement and leaning posts along the journey. We are never left without a means to withstand the shifting of our new part within the

kingdom. Not only are we affirmed for the call upon our lives but we are also equipped for that call and in the context of our community.

In our passage today we find a supportive word from God through Gabriel. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, a mentor, a woman of faith. Gabriel points Mary to a human example of God's peculiar unwavering love found in a relative, who was also shown the favor of God in her life. She could experience the first-hand witness by Elizabeth of how God had changed the barrenness of an old lady into a productive life, with child. God is now expanding the boundaries of Mary's life and, through the birth of Jesus, the boundaries of a world. God is not only willing but able to do what others find impossible.

In our reading today the covenant between Mary and God is made known. God has anointed Mary to bear the message, Jesus in the flesh, Mary acknowledged that when she visited with Elizabeth. She would bridge the gap between the Spirit of the faith and the incarnation, the faith in the flesh. She has been anointed to introduce the world to the transition, from the oppression they had suffered into a full-blown revolution.

What does this mean to us? Once we thought and did not act; once we sat on the sidelines without an inkling that the call on our lives would be for the frontlines. But when God does God's things upon our lives, we have the courage

and the will to do what we once could not even imagine. When we are affirmed, equipped, validated and anointed by the call of God upon our lives, nothing can stop the bursting forth of the sanctifying cry from our lips, “*For with God, nothing is impossible.*”

Do not let fear keep you from following God’s call. It may be scary but some trepidation existed among some well-known change agents in history. Think about Martin Luther nailing those 95 theses to the church door in 1517? He literally could have been killed for what he did. Think about John Wesley’s willingness to work outside the Church of England and create Methodist societies which brought about needed social reform in England? He risked his career and his livelihood but see what God did with his witness. Think about Rosa Parks, who was willing to protest an unjust law by not giving up her seat on a bus but instead chose to spark a revolution of needed change.

In this season of Advent, are we ready for Jesus to enter into our lives? Are we ready to carry God’s message into a world in great need? Will the message be mere words or will our lives embody the loving presence of God in the world? God sends a gift through his favor to the world that needs a favor. Jesus, the Lord incarnate. *Credit is given to the Rev. Jeanette’ Cooper for her sermon outline and sermon notes for today’s sermon.*