

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Graced”

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“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be” (Lk. 1:26-29).

Every so often I pick up the phone, only to hear an unfamiliar voice saying things that make no sense in my situation. Something like, “Yeah this is Bob. Your car is all done and ready to go.” But through my office window I’m looking at my car in the church parking lot. So I say, “Sorry Bob. You have the wrong number” and eventually hang up.

Mary could not “hang up” on Gabriel, but the angel’s greeting made no sense to her situation. Favored one? The Lord is with me? Are you talking to the right girl? Maybe you’re calling on the wrong household.

There she was, an ordinary girl in a nondescript town in the backlands of Galilee. At that very moment, she might have been holding a broom or a bucket or a big cooking spoon. She knew she wasn’t anything special. She knew she wasn’t highly educated. She knew there wasn’t a halo hovering over her head. Favored one?

Others also found favor in God’s sight. In Genesis 6, quote, “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (v. 8). In Exodus 33, Moses was favored by the Lord (v. 12). David too (Acts 7:46). And now, here in Luke, it is Mary who is the “favored one.” What is it these people have in common? Was it that they were so good and virtuous and righteous? I don’t think so. It’s enough to consider David, who was an adulterer, a liar, a murderer. And though some insist Mary was without sin, we don’t subscribe to that because it’s not in Scripture. Romans 3, “None is righteous, no, not one . . . All have turned aside . . . no one does good, not even one” (vs. 11-12). Mary herself responded to Gabriel by saying “my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Mary knew she also needed a Savior too. If not from sin, then from what?

So what does it mean to be favored in God’s eyes? The Greek for “O favored one” comes from the root word for “grace” or “favor”. Our translation is not wrong, but it seems to me that “you have been graced” is easier for us to grasp what is truly meant than to be favored. In English, “favored” sounds like “favorite”, like the darling child, or the teacher’s pet. But Mary has been graced. Mary was favored or graced not because she was chalk full of natural born virtue. None of us is. She was favored because God had mercy on her and was calling her to this special role.

Are you favored by God? Are you baptized? That’s where God put his name on you and washed you clean of your sins. That’s where He adopted you as his own child. If that’s not being favored by God, I don’t know what could be!

Did Jesus also die for you, or was it just for the rest of the world? The cross is where He redeemed you from sin and death.

Is God still taking care of you? Do you have food and clothing, shelter, family and friends? Does Jesus put His words into your ears and His body and blood into your mouth for the forgiveness of your sins? What more could He possibly do to demonstrate you are favored, graced, blessed?

I suspect God must find it absolutely remarkable that as soon as things start going wrong for us, we start wondering whether or not we've fallen out of His favor. Maybe it was something we did or said. But that's not the way God operates. That's the way of the world.

We can fall out of the teacher's favor for not performing well on a test or by joining in the shenanigans of others. At work, we can fall out of the boss's favor for not taking initiative, not living up to expectations, or taking too much sick time. We can even fall out of favor with family members when we don't hold up our end of the expectations, whatever those happen to be. You and I fall out of favor with others all the time. I know I certainly have. And with some, it feels like you're always being judged, always on their fulcrum. You're either teetering this way or tottering the other, and that balance beam can swing rather dramatically. They're watching you, weighing your words, evaluating your performance, judging you.

The Lord is not so fickle! He never backs out of his baptismal promises. He loves you unconditionally. And once we realize that it is life changing. When God favors you, He loves you, not always because you're so loveable, but because of his mercy and grace.

Consider this: Nothing you do or say can earn God's favor and love. Therefore, it's not so easy to fall out of God's favor by what you do or say! Possible? Sure, if you turn your back on him, but He will not so easily turn his back on you.

If you're in my 8th grade confirmation class, you should be writing a sermon note right now and be ready with your memory work later today (next Wednesday). But I'm here to tell you God will still love you even if you don't bother with the memory work or the sermon notes. You might not be confirmed . . . but God will still love you.

God's love for you is stronger than any disappointing test of your skills in school or at work. The things you forget, misplace, or mishandle are not bigger than the steadfast love of God, for you have found favor in His eyes. God's favor for you is stronger than your sin. God's favor for you is stronger than your death.

Because He favors you, He has prepared for you what Peter calls "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

To be favored of God is to be blessed of God. Mary knew it and confessed the same. "All generations will call me blessed" she said. (A blessing is not a trophy. It's a gift.) And God has also favored you, in a different way than Mary for sure. But He favors you.

One last thing. When God favors us, He also calls us. He calls us to do things for Him that may well be out of our comfort zone. He called Mary for the special role of being our Lord's mother. It was not easy for her – at the beginning being an unwed pregnant woman, and later, watching her son be persecuted by the authorities and later still, at the foot of the cross watching her son die.

As a baptized child of God, you are also called to do things that may well be out of your comfort zone. That's tough luck but that's the way the Lord works. He has greater expectations of us than we have of ourselves. So, maybe it's a relatively simple thing such as inviting a friend to church and promising to pick them up and sitting with them so they don't have to sit alone or be the stranger in the group or lost in the liturgy. Maybe it's a little more difficult, such as facilitating a small group Bible Study in your home or at the nursing home. Maybe it's to serve on a board here, or to teach the children in Sunday School or VBS. When God graces us, He also calls us. We might be tempted to hang up on Him. Surely, He has the wrong person here. After all, our sins are ever before us. But when God looks at us, He doesn't see our sins. He sees Christ's forgiveness. And He also sees someone with a unique set of gifts and skills that He can use in His kingdom. He sees someone on whom He has placed greater expectations.

Are you favored? Have you been graced? Of course, you have. So, like Mary, you've also been called to new ventures outside of your comfort zone, in service of Him. Amen.