

Advent 4B, 121811
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, who created us and loves us. Amen.

Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.

No, really. I mean you - all of you. Like the angel Gabriel came to deliver God's message to Mary, I am here to deliver the same - well, almost the same message to you: you are highly favored with God, but you will not be giving birth to the Son of God. (At least, not literally. That's already been done.)

We'll talk more about that in a few minutes, but right now, let's start at the beginning of today's Gospel story. The beginning is several verses earlier than where we started to read this morning - the story of Zechariah, a priest in the Temple, and his wife Elizabeth. She has never had children and is now getting on in years. The angel Gabriel, a messenger from God, appears before Zechariah while he is on duty at the Temple. Zechariah is terrified when he sees him and becomes very fearful. Gabriel says, "Do not be afraid," and then tells him that Elizabeth will become pregnant and give birth to a boy who shall be named John. After Elizabeth conceives she says, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Six months later, the same angel Gabriel appears to a young girl named Mary. "Greetings, favored one!" he says. "The Lord is with you." Mary looks perplexed and is trying to figure out what is going on, so Gabriel says, "Do not be afraid," and then tells her that she will become pregnant and give birth to a boy who shall be called Son of God. He goes on to tell her that Elizabeth, who is her cousin, is pregnant also, because "nothing is impossible with God." Then Mary makes the choice to go along with God's plan for her, and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. While she is there, she sings the marvelous song of justice and freedom - the Magnificat - rejoicing in God because God 'has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

The stories have many similar details, but the most important ones for us today are that both Elizabeth and Mary become aware that they are favored by God, and

that the angel says to both Zechariah and Mary 'don't be afraid.' Now these women aren't the first people to hear those words, nor are they the last. When God comes to Abram in a vision, God says, "Do not be afraid, Abram." Jesus tells many of the people he encounters to not be afraid.

It is an awesome thing to be approached by God - an experience of the holy that would certainly make me afraid, and probably many of you as well. And if we are occupied with being afraid the whole time God is speaking to us, we will likely miss out on at least part of God's message. So we have to try not to be afraid.

And if we are not afraid, and can pay attention to what God is saying, we can also hear the message that Mary heard: "Greetings, favored one. God has found favor with you."

It is no small thing to be regarded, to be favored, especially if you are pretty sure you should not be. Not because you are a bad person, but because you are pretty sure you are unworthy. Mary was a young, unmarried, poor girl from a backwater town that didn't amount to much. All of those were strikes against her. Just being female made her more like someone's property than a human being with dignity and respect and the ability to make choices for herself. But to become pregnant and unmarried made her - according to the law - someone who could be killed because of it. So why in the world would God decide that she was the one to bear God's son?

To be favored by God does not mean that Mary was more special than anyone else, although the Church has made her special in many ways, some of them very peculiar. To have God's favor does not mean that Mary would become rich or have power or be treated with respect. But to have God's favor does mean that Mary has God's approval and support and preference. And God will work in her and through her for the health of the world.

I imagine that Mary's response to Gabriel, "Here am I. Let it be to me according to your word," didn't just roll off the tip of her tongue the instant Gabriel finished talking. I imagine that she had to have time to understand what it meant being favored by God and what it would mean to her to say yes to God's plan. But she did say yes, and it has made a difference to the health of the world.

You, too, are favored. Like Mary, you, too, have God's approval and support and preference. Look at the people around you. They are favored by God, too. Probably

no one's status will change because of it; maybe none of you will become rich or have power or be treated with respect. But, if you say 'yes' to God, God plans to work through you all to do marvelous things as well.

So think about it. Think about what it means to be favored by God. Think about how God makes the impossible possible. And think about how God can work in you and through you to accomplish wondrous things. And when you are ready - if you are ready - you, too, can say, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."