

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Who, me?”**  
**Luke 1:26-38**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**December 18, 2016**

I must have been eight or nine years old. I don't remember for sure. What I do remember is being a bit embarrassed. It was my birthday and everyone in my extended family was coming over. The doorbell rang. I was so excited. I ran over to open it and it was my cousin, Jessie, who was my age.

**“Happy Birthday!”** she said with a big smile.

And I froze. In the excitement, I suddenly didn't know what to say. **“Um... Happy Birthday to you too?”** More aunts, uncles, and cousins poured in the door as I stood there feeling really stupid.

It wasn't her birthday. But I was also so confused as a little boy. What are you supposed to say when you get a greeting like that at the door? It never crossed my mind before... I know this is silly, but I had to ask someone to learn to just say, “Thank you.”

Mary was a few years older than me when she received her greeting from the angel. But she was even more perplexed than I was. **“Greetings, *favored one.*”**

It's not exactly the kind of thing you're used to hearing when you open the door is it? **“*Favored one?*”** I imagine it made her blush just a bit. **“Who me?”** she must have thought.

She doesn't say anything but is confused and surprised by the greeting. You might say she froze herself. It's not something she was expecting. And she's completely taken off guard.

I mean can you imagine, hearing those words spoken to you. You're going about your day, doing what you do on a given Tuesday afternoon and suddenly, “Greetings, favored one.”

And it's not like Mary was used to attention. She's really a nobody young girl from the middle of Nowheres-ville. She's living her 14 year old life just like all the other boys and girls in her village of Nazareth.

Of course she's already betrothed to Joseph by now, but that's probably something her family arranged years ago. Truth be told, Mary's really not that different from every other young woman or young man running around Nazareth in those days.

Learning all you can from mom and dad...

Learning to take care of a household

Learning a trade.

At least, when you're not running around playing with your friends,  
looking all too childish in one moment,

and all too grown up in the next.

Maybe Mary was in the middle of doing chores at home,  
Or maybe she had been playing with friends that morning. Her hair is tussled.  
There's the smallest bit of sweat on her forehead. Her clothes are dusty. She runs around  
to the front of the house, still half-smiling when she turns and sees this stranger there.

**“Greetings, favored one.”**

**“Who me?”** It startles her. A puzzled look comes over her face.

The angel can tell she's confused so he says it again, **“You, Mary... Mary, you  
have found favor with God.”**

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I don't know if that cleared anything up for her, but I do know that discovering  
God's favor was the first astonishing thing she had to wrap her mind around, and it is the  
blessing that makes her sing.

I mean before she hears anything about the Holy Spirit coming on her, before  
there is anything said about conceiving or babies or being the mother of the Son of God,  
she is stunned by this greeting, by this awareness that God would notice  
*her*, that God's favor rests on *her*. She was perplexed, the scriptures say.

And later, after she's heard the rest of the news from this angel,  
and after she travels to meet her cousin, Elizabeth,  
later, when she begins to sing her beautiful Magnificat, the first thing she  
sings about is that favor...

**Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people....”**

This greeting is no small thing. It's the words that change her life: “Greetings,  
favored one.”

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In the gospel of Luke, Mary is, for us, the archetype of faith. She is the pattern of  
faithfulness. Her story tells us about what it looks like to receive God into our lives and  
follow Jesus all the way through the cross to the resurrection. She embodies the path and  
pattern for Christian faith and spirituality.

Which means then, that this greeting is not just to Mary. It's a greeting to us all. It  
is to you. And before you can get anywhere down the road in this story, you're going to  
have to wrestle with this greeting for yourself... this reality:

that you... in your particular, ordinary life...

are noticed by God.

You are God's favored one.

You are a recipient of divine favor.

It's hard to really hear that, deep within us, I know. But according to Luke, this is where the journey of our spirituality begins. One day you have to come to terms with the reality that you are God's favored one. The gospel story begins with this news being announced to Mary and being announced to you.

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There's a lot that is in the way for us to believe that Mary's story is a pattern for our story... that this greeting to her is a greeting to us... a lot that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

We've been tracing the story of the bible all fall now. Back in September, we began with the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. And you may recall that we talked about how that story might better be called the story of "Original Shame."

Before they eat of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve are naked and unashamed, Genesis says. They are open and vulnerable to one another, to creation, and to God. There is no shame, no barriers within them or between them. There are no walls that separate them from one another... and no walls built... in their own hearts.

But something happens when they eat the forbidden fruit. They begin to hide. Some ungodly voice tells them about their nakedness. They feel vulnerable.

And so, they slouch and cower in the shadows of the Garden for the first time. They cover themselves up... because for the first time **they know shame.**

It's a story about what is true for all of humanity... for each of us. Shame is a reality that is part of the human condition. No doubt it has touched your life more than once.

Something happened when you were just a toddler... and you felt shame for the first time. And a piece of your spirit began to hide just a bit...

Something else happened in elementary school, and you tasted shame again.

And then there was Middle School and shame began to blossom in you, and adolescence, and young adulthood... and the moments of shame just keep being written into your life in new ways... and each time it comes over you, something in you hides.

This is a universal human experience,  
and shame is universally destructive. It creates barriers between each of us and barriers between us and God. It has touched the lives of those you love, and touched the lives of those bullies from school, and touched the lives of your co-workers, no matter who they are... it's touched your children's lives.

And it's in you. Some of you are quite aware of it. Others of you may not be. You've tried to ignore it. But it's there nonetheless.

At the beginning of the scriptures, our sacred story, we're invited to recognize that it is operating in us all. And now, we've come all the way through the first half of our sacred story in the Old Testament, and we're crossing over into the New Testament. We're at the very beginning of the Gospel story.

And just as shame began at the beginning of the Old Testament, here at the beginning of the New Testament is good news spoken into that hidden place of shame within you.

An angel, a messenger of God comes and startles us with the words, **"Greetings, favored one."** and that shame in you is no doubt blushing just a bit, asking, "Who me?"

Just like Mary, you and I are going to have to ponder these words. We're going to have to wrestle with them just a bit if we're ever going to really believe it.

Because Mary's story is an invitation to see that God's favor, that this pronouncement, this greeting, is also knocking at your door.

At the door of your deepest regrets, the angel knocks.

At the door of your screw-ups,  
your fears.

At the door of your shame that keeps you isolated and alone,  
the word of God comes knocking,  
and if you'll open it up, you'll hear,

**"Greeting, favored one. The Lord is with you."**

And if you'll hear it, if you'll trust it, then just like Mary, you too can become the womb of God's indwelling.

That's what her story tells us.

Just as the seed of the Spirit was planted in her, it can be planted there in you. You don't have to understand it any more than Mary did. All you have to do is receive it, to allow it. **"Let it be"** she said to the angel.

And who knows? Maybe she was talking about the baby to grow in her, but I have a hunch she was also talking about the favor that is being spoken over her and into her life. **"Let it be."** After all, it's God's favor that she sang about.

And later, when Jesus is grown and he comes back to Nazareth, his hometown, he quotes Isaiah, saying: "I've come to proclaim the year of the Lord's *favor*," as Matt talked about last week. But when Jesus proclaimed God's favor to them, something in them couldn't hear it. They tried to stone him.

It's the opposite impulse of Mary. It's the counter example to her "Let it be." Something in them pushed back against this word of blessing rather than allowing it.

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And I wonder, this advent season, as the angel comes announcing to you, that you too are God's favored one, how open are you to hearing it? Will you allow it into your being?

To help you, I want to invite you into a prayer of imagination with me this morning. This is a different kind of prayer experience. We're going to spend some time with this, and we're going to engage our imagination in this prayer experience:

So, to start:

- Get comfortable in your seat.
  - Sit up. Feet flat on the floor.
  - Take a deep breath.
- Close your eyes and imagine the doorway that you've kept all your shame locked behind.
  - What does that door look like? What is it made of? Try to picture it.
  - Imagine yourself standing there at the door, looking at it.
  - And as you do, you're aware that particular moments of shame are all closed in behind that door. Notice how you feel standing there.
- Reach out and touch the door. How does it feel to the touch?
  - Keep your hand on the door. Take a moment to remember what is behind it.
  - What moments of shame are kept locked away in there?
  - What did someone do to you to make you feel shame?
  - What profound regrets are behind that door?
  - There may be several.
- Open the door. Walk into that place with them, and close the door behind you.
  - As your eyes adjust to the light or the darkness in this new place, take some time to remember yourself there in those moments of shame. How old were you? What were you like then?
  - Is there someone else in there with you, in those moments of shame?
  - What can you see? What has happened to you? What did you do?
- As you are observing, you can hear a slight knocking on the door behind you. You know it's the messenger of God.
  - Ask those in the room with you if you can open the door.
  - What do they say? How are they reacting?
  - You hear the gentle knocking again and can see light coming in from under the door.
- Assure those parts in there with you that it will be OK. Now I want to invite you to take hold of the door handle and slowly open the door.
  - What do you see standing there?
  - What does the voice of God say to you?
  - What does God say to all those hidden parts of you behind that door?

Can you invite this holy presence, this holy love,  
into that room with you and your shame?

Reflection:

*How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is given  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven  
No ear may hear His coming  
But in this world of sin  
Where meek souls will receive him still  
The dear Christ enters in*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in  
Be born to us today  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel*

~ Phillips Brooks, 1868