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4th Sunday of Advent
Year B
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GREETINGS, FAVORED ONE(S)

LUKE 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary, and the next thing she knows, a baby is growing inside her. This annunciation is a prelude to the canticle that we rehearsed on the 3rd Sunday of Advent *both* during the Service for the Lord's Day *and* as one of the lessons in the Service of Lessons and Carols. To me, there is nothing more beautiful in the Greek canon than the song of Mary, and there is nothing more miraculous to behold, at least by everyday standards, than the birth of a child.

The Magnificat begins: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. The mercy of the Lord is for those who fear God from generation to generation. The Lord has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. The Lord has helped God's servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as God promised to our parents."

Is this how you would respond to an angel's visitation? Relax. This is not Mary's initial response either. Luke reports that after Gabriel greets Mary, she is "perplexed," pondering what sort of greeting this might be. Apparently, she is afraid, because Gabriel's next sentence is, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Mary's ability to hear what the angel says despite her fear is impressive. I do not know about you, but a prayer that I pray often is, "God, grant me freedom from distraction."

Be careful if you pray this prayer, because when one beholds God's majesty, it is natural to be afraid. This is consistent with the biblical witness. Ask any graduate of this year's officer training series who has reflected thoughtfully and prayerfully on call stories from Hannah's son to Mary. In story after story, when God calls, the ones whom the Lord calls are reluctant to say, "Yes." This, in fact, may confirm God's call to a person. Beware of those who are eager to assume leadership responsibilities in voluntary associations.

Mary is anything but eager, and yet she is open to the Word of the Lord, even when the Word of the Lord seems extravagant, even when the cost of discipleship is steep. Gabriel promises Mary: (1) that she will conceive and bear a son; (2) that she will name him Jesus; (3) that his name will be great; (4) that he will be called Son of the Most High; (5) that he will be next in David's line of power; (6) that he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and (7) that of his kingdom, there will be no end. Promises, promises...

If you are Mary, do you feel favored? On the one hand, Gabriel is promising you that the Messiah for which the world aches and creation groans will be brought into being through your womb. On the other hand, with this miracle comes being the object of suspicion, exclusion and derision. Clarity of vision precedes strength of purpose. The Spirit provides Mary the one and then the other. Clarity of vision comes through listening, and Mary still listens. Mary still hears. She engages Gabriel, and in so doing, asks a legitimate question: "How can this be since I am a virgin?"

"Fair enough," the angel replies, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." Wow! Holy Mary, mother of God...or if we interpret Luke literally...holy Mary, mother of the son of God...

Still unsure if you would feel favored? Do you feel that you would have a choice in the matter? What if Mary does not say "Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word?"

Does the Spirit of a genderless God enter her anyway? Or does the Spirit go to the next person whom the Lord our God chooses? God's grace, as I have experienced it, is irresistible, irresistible not in the way that it negates free will but in the loving way that it gathers us unto itself. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

Christmas is almost here and with Christmas comes gatherings with mothers and fathers, children and prodigals, and only God knows what else. How will you be greeted? More importantly, how will you greet Christmas? How will you hear God saying to you in Jesus Christ, "Greetings, favored one?"

In Jesus Christ, God loves and favors us all. With this favor comes peace, hope, joy, love and every other biblical notion worthy of its own candle in an Advent wreath. In the center of all that we are and all that we do this Advent and beyond is the light of Christ. This light illumines all others. This light comes into the world in Jesus Christ, and darkness does not overcome it.

How will you be greeted on Christmas? If history has taught me anything, I know that I will be greeted on Christmas by a little girl running into the bedroom and jumping up-and-down on the bed. That afternoon, Lydia and I will be greeted by extended family members at an annual gathering where there is not much difference between what people think and what people say. A few years ago, I walked in, and the first thing that anybody said to me was, "Oh, gosh, where did you get that shirt? It's tacky. Mama, come in here and look at Ron's shirt." "Merry Christmas," I thought. "Merry Christmas," I said.

When I was back in the Carolinas at Thanksgiving, another relative greeted me by patting me on the stomach saying, "Filled out a little bit, haven't you?" To which, I replied, "Well, life is being good to me down there in Alabama." If I had the chance to respond to that statement again---and who knows...I might...as soon as Thursday---I would say, "The Lord is being good to me," but when I think about it, this *is* what I said, because the Lord is the light and the life of all people.

Somewhere midst the pomp and circumstance of Santa-worship, there is a baby crying in a lowly manger. I almost said “lonely,” but it is not. Sometimes the loneliness of Santa-worship is palpable. Sometimes sadness dampens the holiday spirit, and yet as the festival of Christmas begins, there is peace in solitude. Hope springs eternal, as joy absorbs the sadness that weakens us and sometimes clouds our vision. This baby who coos and cries as all of us did (maybe as recently as yesterday) is comforted by the love of parents, who stand in awe of what the Lord has created.

The Holy Spirit delivers on God’s promise to Mary through the angel Gabriel, and in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit delivers on God’s promise to Israel that a Messiah will come: Wonderful Counselor; Mighty God; Everlasting Parent; the Prince of Peace. I fear that the church sometimes forgets that this infant in a manger is all that God promises to Israel and more.

In Bethlehem, Jesus is in a state of becoming. Yes, he is an infant and that image may be appealing, but why? Maybe it is because the thought of a God that we hold, feed and put down for a nap is safer than the image of a God who chases money-changers out of the temple, calls all people to repent and believe the Gospel and to gain one’s life by losing it. Something about this God does not say, “Ho, Ho, Ho” to me.

Oh, to pray with Mary, “Here I am, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then to burst into song: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of a servant.”

There are at least two things that I will remember about my first Advent at UPC. The first is that officer training coincided with Advent. No, I did not plan it that way. When I surveyed the new class, this was the schedule that worked for the most potential participants. At first, I thought, “Isn’t there enough to do this month?” Then the series happened, and a sense of community swelled. Then it occurred to me that there may not be a better time, except maybe during Lent, because Advent is a time of preparation, of spiritual preparation (as opposed to online shopping, but I confess to doing that too).

The other thing that I will remember about my first Advent at UPC is how I have never felt more prepared for Christmas' coming, and I am convinced that this is because of the singing. I have never---repeat never---sung as much during Advent as I have this Advent with you. From the Love Feast to the Services of Evening Prayer to the Service of Lessons and Carols, we have opened ourselves to the Holy Spirit and to one another through the gift of song, often a cappella, and this is how I suspect Mary sang.

Sarah asks a question that Mary answers as the mother of Jesus Christ. Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord? "No," Mary says, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Future tense: Nothing will be impossible with God, because nothing is. And so we sing. May we open ourselves to the possibilities articulated in the song of Mary, to the Spirit that brings Christmas and to the Spirit that Christmas brings: Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.