

You Have Found Favor With God
Luke 1:26-38
December 6, 2020
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 1:26-38

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction: “Hail Mary, Full of Grace”

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed art thou among women.” I’m sure that many of you grew up saying that. I did not grow up Catholic, so I never said it or really heard it other than in movies. The only thing I knew about a Hail Mary growing up was when a quarterback threw a really long pass to a cluster of his receivers in the end zone hoping for a miracle at the end of the game. Come to think of it, I think the first time I heard someone mention the Immaculate Conception in a church setting, I mentally corrected them: “they must be talking about the Immaculate Reception where Franco Harris caught the ball that bounced off that other guy to beat the Raiders.” No idea that was a real thing. And I grew up in church; but Presbyterian, not Catholic.

Last week we were introduced to an older married couple who were unable to have kids, but were visited by an angel who told them their child would be named John and would be used by God in amazing ways. We left them with the husband, Zechariah, at a severe loss for words, having temporarily lost the ability to speak and the wife, Elizabeth, pregnant and socially distanced in her house. We’ll come back to them and hear the rest of their story before Christmas Eve. Today’s text is another angel visitation to announce a pregnancy, and it introduces us to one of the most famous women of all time. A woman who has had church councils debate about her role and status. A woman whose imagined likeness is on stained glass windows and in art museums around the world. A woman to whom millions of people pray.

If you just read the Bible accounts of Mary, you would probably just think, “Wow, she had a really fascinating life, but she’s got a pretty limited role in the Bible. Yes, she gave birth to Jesus, who is the centerpiece of the whole Bible, but other than being around at Jesus’ birth, a few times during His public ministry, and then there at the cross and the tomb, she didn’t play a big role. She doesn’t really get mentioned after the Gospels, in any of the New Testament letters to the churches.” You would never guess that she would be elevated in church history as a dispenser of grace, as the Queen of heaven. You may have been shocked to hear that Pope Pius IX in the 1850s declared that the Immaculate Conception was about Mary’s sinlessness, not Jesus’!¹ You would wonder where the Assumption of Mary, the idea that she floated up to heaven like Elijah and Jesus, came from, since it’s not in the pages of Scripture.

I’m not trying to rip on the Catholic Church, but let me read from their catechism so you don’t think I’m making this up or passing on things I’ve heard:

“Finally, the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things... Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation... Therefore, the

¹ J.D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 500-1.

Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.”²

Where did that come from? The church wanted her to be super-spiritual. But from the Bible’s description of her: she wasn’t, she was ordinary. She wasn’t sinless, she wasn’t a perpetual virgin, and she doesn’t have a storehouse of grace to give to sinners. There’s a very instructive interaction later in Luke’s Gospel that demonstrates how Jesus felt about His mother. Luke 11:27-28 says: “*As He (Jesus) said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!’ But He said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’*” Obviously, Jesus loved His mother and provided for her when He was dying on the cross by asking the disciple, John, to take care of her. But it’s clear that He did not elevate her to some super-status. His focus was on teaching people the ways of the Kingdom and acknowledging obedience to God’s word as the greatest response that we can have.

The Catholic chant is “Hail Mary, full of grace” and the implication is that Mary has a store of grace that she can bestow on people who ask her for it. But as we’re going to see in today’s passage, Mary does not give grace, she received grace! She found favor with God and believed. And you and I can do that. While Mary had a unique role in salvation (no one will ever be asked to carry God in their womb again) and we should honor her for that, she was not extraordinary, she was ordinary. But an ordinary faith is a powerful thing.

Listen in as the announcement of the greatest event in history is first told in private to

I. The Favored One (vv. 26-33)

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Verse 27 says that Mary and Joseph were betrothed. Betrothal back then was kind of like our version of being engaged but was more legally binding. You were not married and joined together yet, but there was a contract between the families. If a man broke the betrothal, he had to give the woman a bill of divorce, so there was a lot more at stake than just the couple’s emotions. What we have a really hard time wrapping our heads around is that this girl is only around 13 years old, the usual age for betrothal in those days. Pictures of her make her look like a 30-year-old woman, but you need to be thinking a very young teenager, a Middle School girl even.

Kent Hughes calls Mary “a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.”³ Remember what Nazareth’s reputation was? In John 1:46, the eventual apostle Nathaniel’s comment when he heard where Jesus was from: “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” It would be like being from Cleveland! Why didn’t God have Jesus born to a wealthy family in a greater place like Rome? Or at the least, He could have been like Moses, adopted by a royal family and brought up in a palace. That would seem to fit better than being born to an impoverished girl and raised in an obscure village. The angel said that the baby would be the “Son of the Most High” Father and apparently He will be

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 274-5.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth, Vol. 1* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), p. 30.

the Son of the most low mother. But this woman had found favor with God. This is the beginning of the contradictions that defined Jesus' life – the royal nobody, the all-powerful servant, the eternal one who would be put to death.

Based on her song in next week's passage, it's safe to assume that Mary really understood her Bible and the history of Israel, despite being illiterate as all poor peasant girls of the time would have been. She would have known everything that the angel was referencing: that her son would reign over Jacob's house forever and sit on the throne of David. She knew that Jacob was also called Israel and was the father of the 12 sons who became the tribes of Israel. So that part is, of course, saying that the baby would be king over Mary's people, the Jews/the Israelites. And David was the greatest king over Israel and had been promised through God's covenant with him to have a descendant sit on his throne forever.

So we find out a lot about this child: His name will be Jesus. His character will be great. The reign of His Kingdom will be everlasting. But Mary interrupted at this point and needed some clarification.

II. The Virgin (vv. 34-37)

³⁴And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵And the angel answered her, "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 called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary was a bit confused on the whole father part of this pregnancy. The angel had to explain it to her – there won't be a man involved; the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and God's power will overshadow you. The Greek word for "overshadow" is the same word (*episkiadzo*) used in Matthew's description of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5) where a bright cloud "overshadowed" Jesus, Moses, and Elijah as God spoke "*This is my beloved Son.*" It's also the word used when the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was translated into Greek and they needed a word to describe God's presence in the sanctuary.⁴ Both places, it's God's presence.

So, the angel clarified: the baby will not be a child of God in the broad sense that all of God's creatures are his children, or even more specifically that the Israelites are His people and so they were God's special, called children. He will literally be fathered by God. But not like in Greek mythology where the gods impregnated human women, there is nothing crude suggested. God prepared Jesus' human body, placing Him in Mary's body.

When the angel mentioned Elizabeth being pregnant in her old age, it was a sign to Mary that if she didn't believe that God could do the impossible with her young age, just go see how far along your "barren" old cousin is. Mary's and Elizabeth's miracle births are compared and contrasted. Both were impossible without the work of God. Yet one was a miracle because virginity was involved, while the other was a miracle because it occurred past the ages of childbearing. One was too soon, the other was too late. Both announcements were made by the same angel, Gabriel. Both children were prophesied to be great, significant in God's redemptive plans. However, one would be from a virgin birth, the other was a natural birth. One is the Son of the Most High, the other is just the son his earthly father. Which meant that John inherited Adam's sin since he would be born of a human mother and father, but Jesus did not inherit Adam's sin, having a divine Father. Both would be filled with the Holy Spirit, but only one of them would be equal to the Holy Spirit. Ultimately Jesus was

⁴ Ibid, pp. 36-37.

like John, but superior in every respect, as John would someday declare: “*He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry*” (Matthew 3:11b).

The final part of this passage is Mary’s response to all of this news.

III. The Servant (v. 38)

38 And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Mary accepted all that the angel told her and was willing to have everything happen exactly as he said. She called herself (in Greek) a *doulē*, which is translated by the ESV as “servant” and other translations as “handmaiden.” But, just like Paul called himself in Romans 1:1 a *doulos*, I think a better translation is that they are calling themselves slaves. Not that they see themselves as cowering in fear of a master who would beat them if they don’t perform correctly; but as absolutely bound to do what their master said. This may be the greatest thing about Mary: that she was willing to believe and obey, doing whatever the Lord asked of her. She probably immediately realized what being a pregnant teenager in her small pious community would mean: Joseph divorcing her; people shaming her, perhaps wanting to punish her for her promiscuity. Those were just the short-term difficulties; she had no idea how anguishing it would be to see her son grow up and be killed unjustly. But she committed to following and obeying whatever word came from God’s mouth, whatever His hand placed in her life.

How are you with surrendering your life to the Lord and being willing to do anything He asks of you? I have to confess, I’m not very good at it, despite being a “paid professional” Christian. There’s something scary about saying, “Lord, I’m willing to do anything you ask of me.” Because I don’t have any control over what that might be! I’m willing to do the things that don’t stress me out, don’t make me go out of my way, out of my comfort zone, that don’t make me miss the Steeler game.

I want you to ask yourself two questions when you’re alone and in a quiet place to reflect and contemplate: 1) Am I willing to obey anything the Bible clearly says to do, whether I like it or not? 2) Am I willing to trust God in anything that He sends into my life, whether I understand it or not? Your answers to those questions, and more importantly, how you respond when those are actually tested in your life will tell you how willing you are to be the Lord’s servant.⁵ That first question assumes that you are reading your Bible, making a habit, a discipline of that. The second one assumes that you see your life in the hands of a Sovereign, active God, who has ordained all things to pass in your life, and who is working on your character and your faith through it all.

Although Luke doesn’t record anything about Joseph and how he reacted to the news of his betrothed woman’s pregnancy, thankfully Matthew tells us his reaction; that he was going to divorce her quietly. He was trying to do the honorable thing - he didn’t want to shame her, but he also clearly thought that she had been unfaithful to him, so he couldn’t go through with the marriage. God took care of that with another angelic visit that you can read about in the end of Matthew chapter 1; an angel says, essentially, “Joseph, follow through on your marriage to Mary because her pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit; her Son will save His people from their sins.” And Joseph obeyed as well. Which was not an easy thing for him either, because now he was taking on the shame of the situation as well. People would assume that he had impregnated her, his reputation would be shot. But Joseph acted in faith, as a servant/slave of God, just as Mary did.

⁵ Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (New York: Viking, 2016) p. 91.

Conclusion

When you watch superhero movies or adventure/fantasy movies, you have to willingly suspend your disbelief, right? Most of us are pretty good at that – Wesley and I were watching the latest Mandalorian episode (*spoiler alert*) and three people get in a fight with @50 stormtroopers and kill them all without sustaining any injuries. So, there’s sometimes a point where you can’t suspend your disbelief anymore: like I know that Iron Man is brilliant and rich and can do lots of things in his super-suit, but when he flies through the hole in the sky into space and lives, that’s where you lost me. You’ve stretched my willing suspension of disbelief too far. So, some of you may be sitting there saying, “OK, I was willing to allow that God talks to people, and I can maybe believe that there are angels and they appear to people, but now you want me to believe that God planted a baby in some woman’s stomach?” You just lost me there, I’m not willing to suspend my disbelief that far.

Maybe there’s a place we can land, where we say that Mary was either delusional or that she or someone else lied to Luke when he was interviewing them, to cover up a big scandal. No big deal, we can still believe that Jesus was a special child that God used in a mighty way without having to make His birth be magical, right? Wrong. Denying the virgin birth of Christ takes away the foundations of the Gospel! Listen to how Philip Ryken says it: “Only the virgin birth preserves the humanity and the deity of Jesus Christ... Jesus had to be born of a woman to be a (human). But if he had been the physical offspring of Joseph, then he would have been nothing more than a man... because he was conceived by a unique creative act of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was not corrupted by the guilt of Adam. Fallen humanity could not produce its own Savior; he had to come from somewhere outside, by way of divine initiative and intervention... One person, two natures – a divine nature and a human nature.”⁶ The virgin birth was essential to bringing a savior into the world who was both fully God and fully man. And when Jesus died on the cross, it was His dual natures that were at work there as well – His human nature allowed Him to physically die and to bear the penalty of our sin on His account; His divine nature kept Him perfect in life and gave Him the ability to defeat death and hell and rise from the dead. If you deny one of His natures, or even downplay one to emphasize the other, you’re moving into dangerous territory that distorts the Biblical picture of our Savior. It all comes down to whether you believe verse 37 or not: are all things possible with God, or only the things that you have a frame of reference for or scientific certainty of? If you say “no,” I’m wondering what your definition of God is, because the God of the Bible, the Creator of the Universe, “*is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think*” (Ephesians 3:20).

Now if you go to a prosperity gospel conference, it’s likely that you’ll hear some version of two of the phrases found in these verses: “nothing is impossible with God” and “you have the favor of God on your life.” And what they usually use those phrases to mean is that you can get great things in your life because God loves you and wants you to prosper. I would caution you to be very careful to use those phrases to speak of your physical and material gain. As far as we can tell, Mary stayed poor her whole life, never moved out of her village, and did not get everything she wanted from life. Both her firstborn son and her husband were taken from her most likely before she was 50 years old. But verse 30 says that Mary had found favor with God. Luke 2:40 will say about Jesus that “*the favor of God was upon Him*” and Luke 2:52 will say that Jesus “*increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.*” Like Mary and Jesus, do you want it to be said about you that “you have found favor with God”? How can we be assured to find favor with God?

Let’s turn to the Psalms to when God bestows His favor and on whom:

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume I: Chapters 1-12* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), p. 36.

-Psalm 84:11 says, *“For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.”* God bestows His favor and His blessings on those who walk uprightly.

-Psalm 90:16-17 says, *“Let your work be shown to Your servants, and Your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!”* God’s favor gives our lives meaning and purpose!

-Psalm 30:4-5a says, *“Sing praises to the Lord, O you His saints, and give thanks to His holy name. For His anger is but for a moment, and His favor is for a lifetime.”* If you are one of God’s saints who has been forgiven and no longer is an object of His wrath, you have God’s favor for the rest of your life!

We see that even more explicitly in the New Testament. The Greek word for favor in Luke 1:30 (*“you have found favor”*) is *xaris*, which is also the Greek word for “grace.”⁷ I have good news for you: if you have been given the gift of salvation through Jesus, then you have found favor with God! Because you have received His grace. Grace is a gift that you did not earn or deserve, but God gives it anyways:

-Ephesians 2:5-7 - *“even when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

-Titus 3:4-7 - *“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”*

If that was too much to take in at the end of a 30+ minute sermon, I would encourage you to spend some time with Ephesians 2 and Titus 3 this week. The bottom line is that God comes to us in our poor, lowly condition, like He came to Mary. When He places His favor on our lives by telling us that He has chosen us to be recipients of His grace and forgiveness, we may, like Mary, ask, “Can you tell me how this is going to happen?” And when we understand how His Son’s life, death, and resurrection bestow His grace upon us, sealed by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can stand in awe and worship, and respond, “God, I’m your servant, do in me what you will.” Amen!

Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

⁷ Ryken, p. 32.