

“FAVORED”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:26-38

1) Favored is a term that can have various implications, depending on your perspective. If you are the favored one in a classroom setting (the teacher's pet) you might enjoy some privileges because of it. But if someone else is the teacher's favorite, you might feel somewhat hurt and wonder why. In international economic relations and politics, a category called most favored nation (MFN) is a status or level of treatment accorded by one state to another in international trade, generally implying a reciprocal arrangement. In sports, the favored team is the one expected to win. If you are said to favor someone else, it means that you bear a resemblance to them, not that you have done something nice for them. In some cases a favored status is something you've earned or merited, yet most of the time being favored has less to do with you than those affording you that favor.

2) Such was the case with Mary. While the church later beatified and sainted Mary as the mother of Jesus, her favored status was not something she had earned. Luke's gospel seems to raise her to a higher level, but the other evangelists mostly ignore her and Mark only mentions her in passing. One biblical commentator suggests, "That Mary found favor with God and was allowed to give birth to his Child indicates she must have been of high character and faith." I think that's implying something that's not in scripture. Mary was a peasant girl, just a child herself of 14 or 15 at most. She was headed down the traditional path for young women of her day—marry and raise children. Faith issues were left to the men, women having little time or energy for such thought. If she was a person of high character and faith, it was because of how she responded to God's favoring of her. Her story has been repeated again and again as young women—and men—on whom society placed little or no value, were single out, loved, and yes favored to make them into who they eventually became. We are often encouraged to favor children or others whom society might overlook. Lady Bird Johnson: *"Children are likely to live up to what you believe of them."* Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa: *"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."* Bono, lead singer of U2: *"God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives and God is with us if we are with them."*

3) God's favoring of Mary was not so that she could live a life of easy and plenty. It was a favoring that called her to be something more. She then had to ponder the big questions of life: "Why did God choose me?" "What does God now expect of me?" "How can I make a difference in the world?" Isaiah says that the spirit of God is given so that we might "bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty and release to the captives, and declare the year of the Lord's favor." Mary would sing out in the words we call the Magnificat that God "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." God's favor has nothing to do with possessions or

status or comfort in life. God's favor is a commission to work at righting the wrongs of society. God's favor is about helping those on the fringes of society. Mother Teresa once wrote: *"When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed."* And Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners Community in Washington DC adds: *"The Bible insists that the best test of a nation's righteousness is how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable in its midst."*

4) How do we respond to God's favor? In Mary's perplexity, the angel assured her saying, "do not be afraid." Don't be afraid means more than "rest easy." It implies something like "take heart," "have courage," "be open and willing to receive what is coming," "get ready for the new thing that God is about to do in your life." It is an invitation to welcome rather than retreat from divine favor and the new future that goes with it. But that can be tough. It's easier to stick with the tried and familiar...easier to complain than to try a new remedy...easier to live with known disappointments than to venture into unknown possibilities...easier even to keep fighting the battles that we know than to undertake a whole different approach to living.

5) God is waiting to bless you and me with his favor. After the Clarke sisters popularized the song "Blessed and Highly Favored" groups of Christian women have taken to responding to the question "How are you?" by saying "Blessed and highly favored by the Lord." Apparently in a book by Michelle McKinney Hammond with a similar title, people are advised to keep saying the phrase so that they will believe it. That may be good advice for us as well as long as we realize what being favored by God really means. Favor can be more of a burden than a badge of honor, more of a task to do than a title to wear. "When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for her performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no reward, yet receives such a gift anyway, that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what a Christian means when we talk about the grace of God."

6) Mary was indeed favored by God—as are you and I. God's grace was given that we might favor God—that we might resemble God—not just in purity and holiness, but in compassion and love for the world as well.