

# Finding Favour

Luke 1:26-38

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On the second Sunday of Advent, our theme is peace.

Like each of the four Advent themes (hope, love, joy being the other three), “peace” is a huge word that encompasses so much.

Our focus today is on the angel Gabriel’s promise to Mary, that her child will reign over the house of Jacob forever, that his will be a kingdom of justice, of mercy, of peace, a kingdom that will have no end.

In many ways, this is the sum of the Christian hope. This is the great future toward which all our presents are oriented, the great hope toward which we are always stretching out toward.

God’s will finally and fully done, on earth as in heaven.

No more war, no more sorrow, no more suffering. The dark clouds of sin and evil and death no longer hanging over and threatening everything that is good, and true and beautiful.

God’s image bearers being what they were meant to be to and for each other.

Peace on earth. Finally.

All of this is implicit in the angel Gabriel’s announcement to a teenaged girl in an insignificant little town in the region of Galilee.

The child whose birth the angel foretells will be the one through whom this kingdom is proclaimed, embodied, and ultimately fulfilled.

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That's the big picture when it comes to the peace that is promised during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

But I found myself thinking in smaller terms this week. I zeroed in on verse 28:

And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.

*Favoured one.* What a thing to hear from the lips of an angel!

Mary is confused. "Troubled," even (the translations vary). Clearly being "favoured" by God is not something that has really occurred to her. She has no idea what to make of this strange greeting.

The implication is that whatever else she may be feeling, her first impression upon hearing that she is favoured by God is not, "Oh, this is excellent news!"

The angel Gabriel goes on to say the four words we talked about last week, the four words that are so often what heaven has to say to earth: "Do not be afraid."

And then, he repeats his original greeting: "For you have found favour with God."

Favour. With God.

I'm not sure how much time you spend thinking about what God thinks about you. If you're anything like me, you kind of know that the right Sunday School answer is that, yes, God loves me. Love is who God *is*, after all, so he's kind of obligated to do so!

But *favour*? My suspicion is that many of us struggle to imagine finding favour or approval or esteem with God.

The other day I was driving around town, and I was at a stop light, and I noticed a bumper sticker on a rusted-out hatchback in front of me.

I AM ENOUGH.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was a declaration or an aspiration. If it was a settled fact in the driver's mind or something they were trying to talk themselves into.

(I also wondered why it was the kind of thing that someone would put on the bumper of their car, but that's another issue. I wonder this about most of the things I see on people's bumpers!)

So few of us believe that we actually are enough, that God (or our neighbours) could ever look on us with favour.

I hear this from young people and old people and in between people. I hear it from Christian people and non-Christian people. I see it in our cultural obsession with identity, where we are constantly trying to sell enhanced versions of ourselves to others online.

We are all seeking approval. Acceptance. Favour.

Peace on earth is the hope of Christmas. Today, I am thinking that part of that peace is peace with ourselves, peace within.

Peace with who God created us to be, with our pasts, with the things we've done or left undone. With the things we will never be or do. With the roads that we didn't take and will never take. With things that have happened to us that we could not and cannot control.

Peace with our bodies, our careers... the list goes on.

Peace with ourselves is such an elusive thing.

I see this most acutely in my chaplaincy work at the jail.

In a few weeks, I'm going to participate in my third Christmas there. This year, I've been asked to preach the sermon, so I think I'll mostly be in the gym doing services with the various units as they come and go.

But the previous two years, my job was to go around with a handful of volunteers and sing Christmas carols to the inmates who couldn't come to the gym, whether it was for disciplinary reasons or health issues or whatever.

I've often said that the Bible sounds different in jail than it does in a church sanctuary. The same is true of Christmas carols

Lines like "And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low" or "For sinners here, the silent Word is pleading" seem somehow more urgent or desperate in jail, particularly when they're being sung through a narrow slit in a heavy iron door.

Last year, after I had finished my Christmas carol rounds, a few lines from O Holy Night came to mind:

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.

Souls need to feel worth. This is acutely, desperately true in the jail, obviously. Many of the people there feel like trash, have been treated like trash for much of their lives, have treated others like trash for much of their lives.

They are well-acquainted with what life looks and feels like when souls are deemed to have little worth. Their sins and errors have piled up. The sins and errors of others have ground them down.

But the jail is just the human condition in its starkest form.

We all, at times, struggle with our souls and their worth. We all, at times, wonder if we are "enough." We are all looking for favour.

From each other and, ultimately, from God.

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Our text today is not a self-esteem manual. The annunciation is not primarily about us at all. It is about God—what God is doing and what God will do in and for the world.

There is a danger in over-psychologizing Scripture, in assuming that all the characters and their reactions are some kind of template for us, in reading all our issues back into the text.

I want to acknowledge this even as I am no doubt treading close to the edge of doing it myself!

I'll say it bluntly: The story of the annunciation was not recorded so that angst-ridden twenty-first century people who wonder if they are enough could use Mary as a template to boost their sense of self-worth!

And yet.

We are surely justified in pondering those words about Mary finding favour with God (not least because Gabriel says them twice!).

We are curious readers and listeners after all! Who wouldn't want to know what kind of a life finds God's favour? Who wouldn't seek to emulate this?

What is it about Mary? Her humility? Her docility? Her piety? Was Mary some special category of human being, someone uniquely pure or good?

Mennonites aren't renowned for devoting too much devotion or even attention to Mary—at least not in comparison to some of our fellow Christians. But I wonder if we sort of implicitly still think that Mary was somehow *different*.

One commentator reflected on it like this:

In popular piety it is often assumed that God's favor is earned by our good behaviour, in either the moral or the political arena, or both. In other words, the theory goes that God's favor comes to those who give something to God; or, conversely, the ones blessed by God are those who have the power to bless God back. Yet... God chooses Mary because she has nothing—she is a young girl in a society that values men...; in her song of praise (1:470-55) she identifies herself as lowly and poor. In other words, this is not one who is favored in the human realm, but God has shown favor with her.<sup>1</sup>

It is profoundly good news that God's favour bears very little resemblance to ours. We tend to favour the strong, the wealthy, the competent, the beautiful, the influential. The ones who are winning at life, or so we think.

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Bracken Long, "Homiletical Perspective on Luke 1:26-38" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 95.

God's favour is not based on these superficial metrics. God sees the heart. God sees, in Mary, not someone perfect or pure, but a young woman who is receptive and will be open to the radical new thing that is about to happen.

(Some have pondered the difference between the angel Gabriel's response to Zechariah, which we saw last week, and Mary's today. Both had questions in response to the announcement that an unlikely child was on the way. Why was Zechariah struck mute and Mary was not? It's impossible to know for sure, but it seems that Mary's posture was more one of receptive curiosity than a demand for proof. Zechariah said, "How will I *know* that this is so?" Mary said, "How will this be?")

We must also acknowledge that God's favour goes far beyond bland affirmation of human specialness. The favour of God *asks* something of us (again, God's favour bears very little resemblance to ours!).

In the story of Mary, we know that "favour" certainly doesn't mean smooth sailing ahead!

Let's again remember that Mary's first reaction to the news that she had found favour with God was confusion, and that the next words the angel Gabriel spoke to her were, "Do not be afraid."

To be a teenage girl pregnant out of wedlock was to be in a position of danger. Best case scenario, she would be the object of scorn. Worst case scenario, she risked being stoned to death by those intent on following the letter of the law.

To say yes to God's call was to put everything—her reputation, her marriage, her very life—on the line.

Debie Thomas points out the double-edged nature of God's favour:

This... story warns me that God's "favor" is not the anodyne thing I'd like to believe it is. It's not the God of the New Testament who equates divine favor with wealth, health, comfort, or ease—that's just me, getting it wrong. **Mary's favored status led her straight from scandal to danger to the trauma of her son's crucifixion. God's call required her to be profoundly countercultural, to trust an inner vision that flew in the face of everything her community expected of her. As the years passed, and her son's enemies multiplied, Mary's "yes" demanded a degree of**

**courage that makes me tremble as a mother. Let's not deceive ourselves: it is no benign thing to be favored of God.<sup>2</sup>**

To be favoured by God is to be invited into a story that may involve great heartache, even suffering.

Yes, we are invited to join God in his grand project of redeeming the world; but the Christian story is always a story of life out of death, of streams of water gradually appearing in the desert, of joy coming in the morning after a long, dark night.

To be favoured by God is to go where God goes. And God goes into the hard places. God does not avoid pain or shame or persecution or sorrow.

God enters the pain of the human condition—he experiences it from the inside—in order to defeat it, to bring healing and restoration.

We will not avoid this. This is part of what it means to be favoured of God.

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So, from what, let's move to who. Who is “favoured by God?”

One chapter later, in the birth narrative of Jesus, we encounter yet more angels.

The angel of the Lord appears to a group of shepherds and says (again!), “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all the people** (Luke 2:10).

Then a heavenly host arrives on the scene singing:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace **to those on whom his favour rests**” (Luke 2:14).

God's favour rests on all of us.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3637-20141215JJ>

How could it be otherwise? The friend of sinners did not come for a select few who were deemed worthy. He came for all because he loves all, and he stretches out his arms of mercy to all who would receive him.

Mary was chosen for a very specific utterly unique and unrepeatable task in the story of God's redemption of the world. The favour of God was expressed differently in her story than anyone else's.

But, to return to the song I mentioned earlier, all souls have worth. Every single one of them.

The world was pining in sin and error...

*Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.*

The Christian conviction is that this appearing changed something for all the souls that struggle, that wonder if they are "enough."

"Immanuel" was and is one of the most hopeful names for Jesus the Christ. God *with* us. God come to share in and transform the human condition and to invite us to join him in the "hard and holy work of releasing peace on earth," as it says in the prayer book I use many mornings.

Souls have worth. Every last one of them. His appearing settled the issue for all time.

This is the source of the peace we long for. Peace on earth, peace in our hearts.

That we are the objects of God's favour. That our soul's worth isn't something that we have to conjure up on our own or prove to one another.

That God loves us and the world too much to abandon us.

Peace very often seems unlikely, even impossible. We look out at our world, and we see so much conflict, so much chaos and confusion, so much darkness.

Where will peace come from? How will it be possible?

We look in our own hearts and we perhaps wonder the same thing. Here, too, we may see conflict, chaos confusion, darkness.

Where will peace come from? How will it be possible?

On this Second Sunday of Advent, 2024, can we believe that Gabriel's words to a frightened unwed teenager are just as true today?

Do not be afraid. Nothing will be impossible for God.

Amen.

