

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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 ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God.

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

*♪♪ Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens
Brown paper packages tied up with strings
These are a few of ----- ♪♪*

“My favorite things,” of course. This catchy tune by Richard Rodgers has been loved for decades now, and artists like John Coltrane and Julie Andrews have left their indelible marks on the song’s legacy as other artists continue to cover it today.

“My Favorite Things” has even been included on many artist’s Christmas albums, even though it was not originally associated with the holiday. The reason for that is because the holidays often spark thoughts about our favorite things. Favorite presents we’ve received. Favorite presents we’ve given. Favorite meals to share. Favorite memories to ponder. Favorite stories and customs to perpetuate. Many things are favored by us during the holidays. We may even have a favored distant relative, at least compared to other members of the extended family. Who am I kidding? We all have a favored relative, at least at some point in our lives.

When our gospel lesson says that the angel Gabriel’s first words to Mary are -- “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” -- do we interpret that the same way? Moments later, Gabriel says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Is that state of being favored similar to when we favor one relative during the holidays over another? Does it mean she has done something that makes God like her more than other people? I believe that is not how we are supposed to hear this phrase.

There is nothing in the text that leads us to believe Mary is favored because of how extraordinary she was prior to this encounter with Gabriel. We simply aren't given an answer, and perhaps it is that lack of detail that is the good news we need to hear. Up to this point, Mary was a common, lowly person. A young woman who was born into a Galilean community that effectively had no social mobility. You were born there, you filled your role in the community, and you ultimately died there. The Romans -- who had long ago conquered the land -- were at best a constant thorn in the people’s side, so most people in Galilee just kept their heads down and went on with life. Mary was unremarkable up to this point in her life, and every indication we have is that she was completely common.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Unlike our usual tendency to favor someone as a result of some action they do or a quality they have, I’m led to believe Mary’s being favored is the result of something else. It is not a result of who she is, rather it is a result of who God is. She is a recipient of God’s favor because God desires to favor her. God desires to be a part of her life. Seen that way, you and I also are favored by God, simply because God desires to bring wholeness to our lives. God’s presence in Mary’s life -- or anyone else’s -- will always carry grace, love, and mercy.

When we commend and honor Mary, it is for her response to God’s presence in her life. She is willing to let God do something completely new, unexpected, and extraordinary through her. That willingness of hers is something we are called to emulate. It is a willingness to allow God to work in our lives; to change our perceptions, opinions, and actions. To guide us in a life that is shaped by Christ, not guided by our own self-interests.

Perhaps that is the difficult pill to swallow. We are happy to hear that God is present with us, and our hearts desire to desire an open willingness like Mary’s to God’s activity in our lives. Yet God’s activity in our lives often has tangible results. For Mary, her openness to God came with results: the rumors would follow her for decades that her pregnancy was the result of rakish behavior; she would have to flee her homeland for a time in Egypt as a refugee; and she would have to witness her child be tortured and left for dead on a cross. Those are the tangible results of her open willingness to God working through her life. Clearly being favored by God doesn’t guarantee that life will be easy and without burdens.

To understand this, we need to look at Mary’s story through the lens of faith. With faith, we can see how Mary’s life certainly had more than its share of pain and suffering, yet the lens of faith shows us how God’s activity through her life is a greater blessing. The net sum of the benefits and costs in her personal life are debatable, yet there is no argument that through her openness God has been able to do extraordinary things for this world... like saving it.

You and I are, like Mary, favored by God because God seeks to be present with us and work through our lives. Obviously Mary's life is unique and far beyond anything we are likely to encounter. Yet discipleship means that we might need to not travel some paths that would have led to something personally beneficial. In their place, however, are paths that would allow God to benefit others through us. Living during a contagious pandemic is a contextual case study of this concept; we must daily contemplate how our faith informs our decisions between our self-interests and our community's interests.

Mary's faith teaches us how to do this; it is a model for us. Her faith led her to acceptance, it instilled in her resolve, and it conjured within her the strength for whatever awaited her. Rather than worrying about her own path, Mary was intent on following God's way no matter where it led her. Because she knew God was with her. Emmanuel. Likewise, may the presence of God with us shape our faith and our lives. Because, like Mary, we are a few of God's favored things.

Thanks be to God. Amen.