

Those Who Dream...are not alone.

Today's second lesson comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1 verses 26-45. Listen for God's word to you this day.

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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 ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>35</sup> The 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<sup>[c]</sup> will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> *And 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then 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.

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled

with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be<sup>[a]</sup> a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

The annunciation narrative and Mary’s following interaction with Elizabeth leave many questions unanswered. There are numerous moments throughout that have us wondering what all really happened. Questions about what all went through Mary’s head as she pondered the words of the angel, how she felt about the whole proclamation that she had been favored by God, and how Elizabeth felt about finally conceiving a child, why Mary fled with haste, what it was like for Elizabeth to receive Mary into her home and what it meant to each of them to find safety with each other.

Mary has found favor with God, and it has resulted in somewhat of a precarious situation for her. Over the centuries I would argue that so much of what we have tried to boil Christianity down to is finding favor with God, yet it is not *this* particular type of favor we wish for, not the favor that results in a child being born to an unwed couple in a year that is less than perfect, and in circumstances that are far from what you would expect when one has in fact found favor. Our ideals of what finding favor looks like seem to pivot around material possession or good fortune. But, what we hear in this story is far from riches and good fortune. Mary has found favor in a way that is dangerous and life-altering, this story once again, like so much of scripture, turns our expectations upside

down, to reveal the divine works of our creator, moving in unexpected and revolutionary ways, showing favor in God's way, not our way.

Debie Thomas asks this about finding favor with God, "And *this* is the special honor God bestowed on [God's] "favored one"?" She goes on to say... "This gap [or lack of explanation about what being favored by God means long term] in the Annunciation story warns me that God's "favor" is not the anodyne [inoffensive] 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>1</sup>

Favor isn't prosperity gospel, it isn't a life full of only good things happening, it's the hard road, it's the difficult decisions and circumstances and the choice to remain faithful, trusting, and open toward God in the midst of all the difficult twists and turns, in the midst of all God has to offer.

Intertwined with Mary's story is Elizabeth's story. Our bulletin cover today and the image on your screen created by Lisle Gwynn Garrity show Mary and Elizabeth embracing one another. One old, one young...both testaments to God's favor, both full of uncertainty and yet finding safety in their embrace of one another. As they embrace

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas. The Pause Before Yes. [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net). December 21, 2014.

Elizabeth exclaims with abundant love and joy the good news of Mary's pregnancy. She knows, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, that Mary is carrying a child that will be for the world a different child, a different man. And, she proclaims Mary's favor, in a situation that could have left Mary without support from family at all, cast out. Instead Elizabeth wraps her up in a full body embrace. You can almost feel their excitement. This embracing and this ecstatic reception is what leads Mary to her song that we discussed last week, that song that speaks of revolutionary joy for a world that is in desperate need of something different than what it has made for itself.

As I think about the birth of Jesus, as I think about Mary's running to safety in the arms of her cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's confirmation of what Mary thought she might have heard from that angel. As I think back or ahead to Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit to each of us, and I think about Christ dwelling within all of us, bringing forth the love of God through us, I can't help but think of how we really are all connected, even when we prefer to see ourselves as disconnected individuals.

I only touched on the New Testament accounts, but you can think of Hebrew text examples and examples from your own lives of how God uses community and relationships time and time again throughout history to bring us news of God's favor. It is in community that we gain our confidence in faith, it is in community that we learn to love as God loves, because outside of community, in isolation, alone, we can easily discount the value of any person not like us, or anything that goes against our way of seeing it.

Journeying with someone as Elizabeth and Mary do with and for one another has a way of shoring up that person for whatever it is they must take on, however it is they have received God's favor. It is in their relationship with one another that they realize the fulfillment of their dreams, and dreams they did not know they had.

Just as has been happening since the beginning of creation, we are no different. We share our dreams with friends, family, trusted colleagues, and they help us refine the path of those dreams, sometimes charting new courses, like Mary, and sometimes waiting out the long haul to see them brought to fruition, like with Elizabeth. And this is no small deal. This is a big, revolutionary deal, for Mary and Elizabeth and for us. To dream of what could be is to dream of something bigger than what the powers that be want us to imagine possible, and to dream is to believe in something that God calls into being in and through us.

Vicar Judith Jones says this about Elizabeth's revolutionary act of welcome: "By greeting Mary with honor, Elizabeth overturns social expectations. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect social judgment, shame, even ostracism from her older kinswoman. Yet Elizabeth knows from her own experience the cost of being shamed and excluded. In her culture a woman's primary purpose in life was to bear children, so as an elderly infertile wife she had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure...Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbors would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honorable than herself. Thus the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honor

instead. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shameful of Mary's situation to the reality of God's love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes...Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people in our society today? Where is God at work through people whom our neighbors and [if we're being honest, we] often exclude or treat as shameful? Will we listen to the Spirit's prompting when the bearers of God's new reality show up on our doorstep?"<sup>2</sup>

Mary and Elizabeth, in their own unique ways are both remarkable testaments to God's love, to dreaming in relationship, to embodying all that Christ embodied. They show us what it means to accompany those who need accompanying. And, if we begin to see God's favor in a new light, in a light that offers each of us opportunity to say 'yes' to the difficult and scary path, I wonder if we might begin to see Christ born into the world anew?

Through Mary and Elizabeth's embrace of God's favor and embrace of one another, we are reminded of the words Saint Francis once prayed:

Lord make Me an instrument of Your peace

Where there is hatred let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Jones. "Commentary on Luke 1:39-45. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-139-45-46-55-3>

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine master grant that I may

Not so much seek to be consoled as to console

To be understood, as to understand.

To be loved, as to love

For it's in giving that we receive

And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it's in dying that we are born...

To eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

May we indeed be instruments of God's peace, may we embrace one another with a love that is emboldened by the Holy Spirit, may we dream of a world that fulfills God's dream for each of us, knowing we may not be able to clearly see God's favor, and may we trust that we are not in this alone. God journeys with us, we are here to journey with one another. We are favored, Christ is born within us, today and every day. May we believe *that* truth so deeply that all we do and dream of is a result of Christ born in us, not just in this week but each and every moment of our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Prayer of Saint Francis. <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/saints-prayers/peace-prayer-of-saint-francis/>.