

I noticed something in today's gospel reading that I have never noticed before. What startles Mary today is not the visit of the big, angel-in-charge Gabriel, but what Gabriel has to say to her. He came to her and said: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." And Luke tells us that she was "perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

Most of us would probably have our socks knocked off by a visit from the heavenly realm, and you would think Mary would have been profoundly unsettled, and perhaps she was. But Luke's focus is not the presence of the angel, but his words. They send her into a tailspin.

The fourth weekend of Advent clearly belongs to Mary. She, the one who is about to give birth, owns this day. Frankly, the church in its history has been quite awkward in dealing with Mary, which may be the result of the awkward and, frankly, hurtful ways that it has dealt with women in general through the centuries.

Our Catholic friends have specialized in Mary, something many Protestants have questioned. Many Protestants have thought that Catholics overdosed on Mary, and perhaps they did, turning her into an unreachable icon. The result was that Protestants tended to leave Mary alone, although there have been those who saw Mary as a paragon, a model, of passivity, which is what some thought women should be. Now frankly, it's hard to reconcile that view of Mary with the Biblical witness, particularly Luke's view. In Luke, she is everything but the epitome of passivity. I mean, consider her song, her famous Magnificat? It is a radical, revolutionary song that speaks of God turning the world upside down, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly. Mary is no wall flower. She is a powerhouse, young though she may be.

It's been a mistake for us not to pay attention to Mary. There's something in her that is worthy of our consideration as we wait and as we give birth, as we conclude Advent and enter Christmas, as we live out our lives as followers of the one she is about to give birth to. Mary is a model. She is a paragon. She is an archetype, the quintessence, the epitome of something quite large and essential.

Some scholars think that what we have in today's gospel lesson is Mary's call story. If you know even a little about the prophets of the Old Testament, you realize that almost all of them have a call story that follows a pattern. The prophet is greeted, often by the heavenly realm. The prophet responds with a startled reaction, which is met by an exhortation not to fear. Then a divine commission is given, only to be objected to by the prophet. The objection is then met by heavenly reassurance. A confirming sign then is provided. And then the prophet responds affirmatively to the call.

This describes well what happens to Mary. She is greeted by the angel. She is startled by the greeting and yet is exhorted not to fear. She is given a commission, and she objects. "How can this be, since I am a virgin, a young woman." And then Gabriel reassures her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." And she then is offered a sign of what will happen to her with words about her old relative Elizabeth giving birth to John. And finally she responds, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Mary is being called. She is a prophet who will speak to us not only through her words, but through the baby who soon will come out of her womb. She is a mother to a new world, a new creation. She is a paragon, a model of *faith*. The call comes, and she responds. She doesn't have to have it all figured out. She doesn't have to have all the questions answered or the risks eliminated. She offers herself, her body,

her life. She lives in trust, trust in the God who chose her, an unlikely one, a young one, an unmarried one, a poor one, a woman--in the world's eyes, an inconsequential one.

To *this* one comes the greeting from the angel Gabriel: "Grace to you, greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" You see why Mary is perplexed. *She* is seen as favored. *She* is seen as one whom God is with. Isn't God with the kings? Isn't God with the folks in charge? Isn't God with the rich and famous? God is with *her*. *She* is the prized one. It's a new day. It's a new dawn. The world has been turned upside down. So, she and we sing:

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and  
my spirit rejoices in you. You have looked with  
love on your servant here, and blessed me all  
my life through. Great and mighty are you, O  
Holy One. Strong is your kindness evermore.  
How you favor the weak and lowly one, humbling  
the proud of heart. You have cast the mighty  
down from their thrones, and uplifted the humble  
of heart. You have filled the hungry with wondrous  
things and left the wealthy no part. Great and mighty  
are you, O Faithful one, strong is your justice,  
strong your love. As you promised to Sarah and  
Abraham, kindness forevermore. My soul proclaims  
your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you.  
You have looked with love on your servant here, and  
blessed me all my life through.

It may come as a surprise to many, but Martin Luther was a big fan of Mary. To him, Mary represented the typical pattern of God's interaction with humans. *God* does the choosing. Much religion talks about how we choose, how we are the choosing entity. For Luther, it was about God's choosing, which is why for him Mary is a stand-in for all of us, as David Lose says, "who have no right to expect God's

attention and favor and yet are surprised to discover that God has chosen, elected, called, addressed, and honored each of us.”

What if I told you that today you are the ones being addressed by the heavenly realm? What if I told you that today you are the favored ones? You are the ones whom God is with? Oh, I know. You are pretty ordinary. You are quite shy. Your life seems very tough. Many of you aren’t the movers and the shakers. Some of you just barely get by financially. You’ve been through divorce. You’ve got a crazy family. You suffer from alcoholism. You’re haunted by mental illness. Your kids have disappointed you. You have been victimized by other people and even the system. It doesn’t matter. You are the ones who are favored. You are the ones who are addressed by the angel with these words, “Greetings [literally, ‘grace to you], favored one!”

Oh, by the way. Being favored doesn’t mean you are better than others, that you are the preferred child of the father or the mother. Mary stands in for all of us. We all are recipients of the marvelous grace of God, God’s choosing. That grace isn’t dependent upon our status, our checkbook size, our achievements, our age, our skin color. That grace is dependent simply upon grace.

But I have to tell you this. Grace is after you. It has a job for you to do. It’s calling you. It’s calling you, men and women alike, to give birth, give birth to love and grace and yes, a turned-upside-down world.

You see, if God is choosing you, little old you, then you must realize that in him, the world looks really different. In him, all bets are off. In him, the forgotten are remembered, the lowly are lifted up, and those who live on the basis of their wealth, their achievements, their power are brought down low.

Favored one, you have a calling on your life. Grace doesn’t mean you always get to sit still, although sometimes you do. It means that you have a place, you matter. You are not incidental to life and history. You

have a calling on your life. You've got something to do. And what is that something? To live into the world as God sees it. To favor and lift up the lowly. To help make this world more just, a world where power, money, influence don't run the show. And let's face it. We are living in a world where this message is so badly needed. We are living in a world where babies are dying in war, where whole towns are being destroyed, where disease and hunger are killing far too many, where far too many people are being left out and left behind. Grace is calling you and me.

Greetings, O Favored ones! The Lord is with you. You've got a job. You've got work to do. You are about to give birth. But don't worry! What's going on here is a lot bigger than you. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The real work belongs to God. God is driving the bus. Maybe the biggest work you are called to do is to live by faith, by trust, to be like Mary, to be prepared to go along for the ride!