



**“Favored One”**

**Scripture – Luke 1:26-38, 46-53**

**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, December 20, 2015**

Did you catch what the angel called Mary? He did not use her given name. He called her “Favored one.” Her response to Gabriel? Luke writes, “She was much perplexed by his words, and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

Over the ages, many artists – Fra Angelico, Titian, da Vinci, Botticelli – seem to have zeroed in on the word “pondered,” frequently painting Mary with her head bowed in silent reflection. Her sweet, soft, cherubic face has a peaceful appearance as she contemplates the angel’s message.

Really? That’s not how I picture the moment. When Luke writes that she was perplexed by the angel’s words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be, I picture her in shock. I’m no artist – stick figures are challenging for me – but if I could paint, I would paint Mary wide-eyed, frantic and in disbelief. I picture Mary thinking “What is his definition of *favored*? I am poor, I am unmarried and I have just been told my pregnancy test came back positive! Favored? This is a *nightmare*!”

According to the law in Leviticus, Mary could be stoned. At the least, she could be run out of town, so what did Gabriel intend by naming her the *favored* one?

Think with me for a moment. What sort of person would God desire to be the mother of Jesus? Obviously, she would need to be faithful, loving and wise. But that is hardly the full package. It would also be essential for her to be courageous, determined and resilient. Maybe the angel called her the favored one because he perceived her character and believed she was brave enough and bold enough to handle such a demanding assignment.

Where did we ever get the impression that Mary was timid, reticent and demure? You can ponder things in your heart without being the least bit shy and retiring. Whether it was simply a misunderstanding, or a patriarchal church wanting to keep women’s hands off the reigns of leadership, we need to bury the notion that Mary was meek and submissive.

Today’s Scripture reading tells of two episodes a few months apart. The first – often called the Annunciation – pictures the moment when a messenger from God announced to Mary that she would give birth to God’s special child.

The second passage relates an incident a few months later when Mary visits her relative, Elizabeth. Known as the Magnificat or the Song of Mary, she sings praises to God and declares God’s concern for the poor and contempt

for injustice. She sings, “(God) has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.” (Luke 1:51-53)

Her song is the opposite of a sentimental lullaby sung by one who is sheepish. Her song is bold and radical. It calls for us to hold a dramatically different perspective on the world than is commonly the case. Instead of the powerful politicians oppressing the poor, the poor are lifted up and the mighty are bounced from their lofty positions. Instead of the rich wallowing in their wealth, the “poor sit down at the banquet table while the callous rich are left out in the cold.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary also demonstrated how mentally and physically tenacious she was by making the 75 mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the final days before she delivered. It would be painful and exhausting to ride a donkey in such a condition. Surprisingly, there is no indication that she rode one. That mental picture has been painted for us routinely, but the Scriptures say nothing about how she made the trip. She may very well have walked the entire distance. Whether being jostled on the back of an animal or walking all those miles in the final weeks of pregnancy, this was one tough woman.

Some thirty years later, Jesus will echo his mother’s song again and again. He will warn the rich of trusting in their wealth, he will bless the poor, he will bring outcasts into the fold, and he will plant the seeds of peaceful revolution to topple those who oppress. Mary must have taught him her song at an early age.

Have you ever wondered why Mary sang? Songs carry energy and inspiration. Songs unite people; songs give voice to deep convictions, songs can express sorrow or praise. During the Civil Rights movement, songs gave protestors courage and reminded them of the virtue of their cause. When resistance was stubborn and violent, and some surrendered to despair, songs gave the committed strength to keep moving forward and hope that they would be victorious. “Oh deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.”

Lutheran pastor David Lose “visited Eastern Germany a few years after the fall of the Berlin wall. The group with which he traveled had an opportunity to meet with leaders of the resistance in Leipzig. Many have overlooked this part of the story, but for several months prior to the wall crumbling, peaceful protests were held by the citizens of Leipzig. Gathering on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church, they went into the streets and sang. In two months, their numbers swelled from one thousand people, to more than three hundred thousand. Over half of the citizens of the city sang songs of hope and protest and justice until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. After the wall fell, one of the pastors who had led the resistance asked a former secret police commander why they had not crushed this protest movement as they had crushed so many others. His answer: they had no contingency plan for prayers and songs.”<sup>2</sup>

I worry about the state of our nation. There is too much crime and violence. There is too much poverty and homelessness. There is too much selfishness and greed. There are many people of faith who are kind, compassionate, and generous, and I am thankful to be surrounded by you. But there seems to be a rise in the number of people who have contempt for, or are indifferent toward, people in need. Perhaps it is a result of more people fearing for their personal well-being. In the corporate world, job stability has become a quaint notion, acts of terrorism make people wary of large gatherings, and racism fosters suspicion. Maybe we need a new song to remind us of the importance of caring for one another and working together for the common good.

God put a song in Mary’s mouth because the world was not as God intended. Like Mary, we too, yearn for the world to be very different than it is. We yearn for a world devoid of terrorism and hate crimes, devoid of religious and political extremism, devoid of cancer and other illnesses that take the lives of young people. We yearn for a world in which all who are able to work have jobs that can support their family, where all who are ill – physically or mentally – receive the care they need. We yearn for a world where those trapped in meaningless routines will

find faith, where the mean-spirited are exorcised of their demons, where people of different races treat one another as family, and where people of different faiths respect each other and emphasize the many beliefs we hold in common.

In the West, Christianity has become so complicit with the society at large, that many are blind to its revolutionary principles. Mary's song may be the precise prescription for a society that has become too comfortable with cynicism, despair and moral degeneration.

In her opening verse, Mary sings out that those with self-inflated egos are blind to their true needs and toxic to be near. God wants to deflate those who have pumped themselves up on hubris so they can be filled with wisdom, truth and love.

In verse two, Mary intones that God wants to knock the oppressors off their mighty thrones and liberate those who labor under ruthless regimes. God cannot bear to see people treated unjustly and demands that we balance the scales when they become lopsided.

In her final verse, Mary proclaims that those who trust in their bank accounts become callous to the needs around them. Lacking feelings of sympathy, they cut themselves off from what makes us genuinely human.

As Mary was on the verge of giving birth to Jesus, God inspired her with words that were passionate and prophetic. As we celebrate the birth of the one who taught compassion, justice and peace, perhaps God will embolden us to find our voice.

## NOTES

1. *The Message* translation of the Bible.
2. David Lose, "What Time Is It?" *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2015, p.14.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Susan D. Moseley**

Holy God, we are so very keen and attentive, that in this season you are near to us in such a place as a stable in Bethlehem – in such a moment of history, both ordinary and yet extraordinary in its message.

Your unmerited favor punctuates time; your will and your wisdom are manifest in the life of a child, and we still ponder, like Mary, all that this means to us.

Thank you, O God, for the beauty of this church in this season and for every face that greets us here,  
for glorious music and radically inspiring message,  
and for the opportunities we have in this congregation to make a difference in our  
community.

Yet, even as we celebrate these blessings, we know many in our faith family are consumed with grief or worry or fear. Please, Holy Comforter, touch their deeply private pain, those burdened and breaking hearts, with your peace that passes all understanding.

O God, shine your light into our homes – at kitchen tables, in living rooms and dens, in basements and bedrooms – let grace permeate the conversations we have this holiday season with extended family and guests, with our partners, spouses, and children. May we recognize your light shining in every face.

Accompany us, Holy Spirit, into the marketplace where frustration and exhaustion can hang like smog in the air. Put a kind word on our lips to share with clerks and servers, and help us be mindful of fragile hearts hiding behind the masks of holiday cheer.

May we in our plenty and safety not be indifferent to the pain of poverty or the voices of bigotry. Teach us we pray, to care for peoples, to seek the welfare of all nations. Make room in our hearts to welcome the strangers we meet and even to extend ourselves to refugees who no longer have homes...nor hopes of going home. May we never grow weary in our pursuit of justice.

All creation is groaning for a coming time when nations live in harmony, when the lion will rest with the lamb and the land will flower and flourish; disease shall be vanquished and even greed will be overcome by hearts changed to reverence all living things. Show us, Oh Lord, how to be instruments of your peace. And help us forgive one another even as in Christ we have been forgiven.

And now hear us again as we pray the prayer that Christ taught us, saying, "Our Father..."