



"Hail, O Favored One"
Scripture – Luke 1:26-32
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 20, 2020

Last week we honed in on the lyrics of the revolutionary song Mary sang to her older cousin, Elizabeth: The Magnificat. Mary was in the early days of her pregnancy and traveled to her cousin to break the news in person.

Today's gospel lectionary reading rewinds a bit to the moment the angel Gabriel visited Mary and announced what was in the works. You have undoubtedly gazed at several paintings of this iconic scene known simply as: The Annunciation. It seems that every classic artist tried his hand at it.

While their interpretations of this moment vary, most have Mary in a seated or kneeling position. The angel is usually standing over her and in many of the renditions, Mary has her hands folded across her chest or in her lap. Several even depict Mary reading a hardbound Bible which did not come into existence for several centuries.

If you could paint, how would you picture this scene of the angel Gabriel breaking the news: "Mary, you will become pregnant and give birth to a boy who will be called the Son of God"?

For my money, Botticelli interprets this moment best. He portrays Mary leaning away, with her palms outward. It is as if she is attempting to deflect the flow of words spewing from Gabriel, who is on his knees pleading with her.

Artists have the freedom to interpret this scene as they wish because the Biblical text leaves it up to the imagination of the reader. Who knows? Maybe the gospel writer intends for each of us to reflect on how **we** would respond if a messenger from God encountered us with such shocking news.

I have mentioned that Camilla and I have been watching "The Crown." If you have seen some of the episodes, you know that everyone – even Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher – address the Queen as "Your Majesty."

A colleague, who is also hooked on the series, was bothered by the idea that such a grandiose title would be given to a mere mortal – until he recalled that people of faith apply quite a lofty title to humans when we claim that we are created in the image of God. That triggered a thought: "What if we were to address all our fellow mortals as if they were royalty?"¹

Imagine first thing after climbing out of bed, saying to your spouse, partner, or children: "Good morning, your Majesty." What if – as you enter your workplace – you said to the receptionist or custodial staff, "Your Royal Highness." Or, as people log on to your Zoom meeting, you greet each person, "Your Majesty or Your Honor."

Of course, if you said that out loud some might think you were pulling their leg; others would worry that you are losing your grip on reality!

According to Luke, when the angel Gabriel addressed Mary, he said, "Hail, O favored one!" which is the ancient world's equivalent of "Your Majesty."

And Mary's reply to this greeting? She does not say, "Thank you." The text says that she was *greatly troubled*. In my video of this scene, I picture Mary glancing around to see if someone else is present, and then finally saying, "Who, me? I am the 'favored one?'"

But something occurred in that encounter – something that transformed Mary from a shy teenage girl to a strong young woman who suddenly found her voice.

It makes me wonder what impact we would have on others if we approached each person as "O favored one, Your Majesty, your Royal Highness." I know, I know. If we gave voice to that thought, most people would simply think we were messing with them. But, how would it shape our approach to each person – how would it elevate our interaction with each person – if the first thing in our mind as we encounter another is "Your Majesty"?

The best place to begin is to apply this title to yourself. The next time you look into the mirror, think to yourself – say it out loud if you are bold – "O favored one. Your Majesty." Once you overcome your self-consciousness you might just stand a bit taller.

Make no mistake this is how God sees you. Regardless of the way you are treated by your boss or sibling or neighbor, God knows that you are a beloved child, a person of worth, a person who deserves to be treated with respect and dignity and kindness. Imagine how differently you would approach each day if you overcame your amnesia and reclaimed your true essence.

Of course, embracing the title "O favored one" or "Your Majesty" is not as simple as thinking the words or even shouting them. To fully adopt this moniker, you need to be as gracious with yourself as God is. If you slight yourself for not being perfect or there is the voice of a parent ringing in your ear that you have not quite measured up to some arbitrary standard, remember that God loves and accepts you despite knowing that you can be deceitful, envious, and self-centered.

In fact, remembering this is key. If you imagine that you have earned the title "O favored one" because you are clever and witty and have racked up an impressive array of accomplishments, then you will be reluctant to bless others. You will construct a standard they must reach before you dub them with the title.

Instead, each of us needs to be mindful that when we treat others as "O favored one" or "Your Majesty," we free that person to live into the title. When a person realizes that she is considered worthy, she lives a more beautiful life.

Ronald Ruiz had a long career as a New York City bus driver. He will always remember one woman in particular, a senior, who stepped onto his bus one day. She had a faraway look in her eyes. She seemed lost and confused.

Ruiz could not tell if she had an illness, but he said she looked beautiful. Although for a hot summer day, it was odd for her to be wearing a fur coat.

He spoke to her: "Are you okay?" She said, "I'm fine, but I don't remember the name of the restaurant where I'm supposed to meet my friends."

He said, "Now, just take a seat and I'll run in and I'll check each restaurant."

He stopped at the first restaurant, walked in and inquired. No, not this one. He stopped at a second restaurant and had the same experience. He stopped at a third and a fourth. Nothing.

Finally, at the very last one on the left, he said to himself, "It has to be this one." So he said to her, "Stay here, Sweetie. It's nice and cool in here." He walked into the restaurant and said, "There's a woman on the bus, and she's looking for the restaurant where she will meet her friends." He spotted a whole bunch of other seniors there and they said, "Oh it's probably our friend."

So he ran back to the bus. He said to the woman, "Sweetie, your restaurant is right here. Wait, don't move." And he took her hand. He wanted to make her feel special, like he was driving a limousine instead of a city bus.

A wide grin spread across her face and she said, "I feel like Cinderella." Then she said, "I've been diagnosed with cancer, but today is the best day of my life."²

Imagine the transformation you could generate in others, if you approach them as you would the Queen. Imagine the joy that would swell within you if you approached others with the desire to bless them.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Roger Gench for his insight he shared in "The Presbyterian Outlook," on December 14, 2020.
2. Jasmyn Morris, Storycorps.org

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Promise — Through surprising messengers and unexpected messages, you lean close to whisper the good news: "**I am with you.**"

As we prepare to celebrate the Messiah's birth, may we live as people who trust this good news, who know in our hearts that you are not only God-Above-Us and God-Before-Us, but also God-With-Us. With eager longing, we await Emmanuel's coming and anticipate the gifts of peace, hope, joy, and love he brings.

God of Grace —

We have lit the Candle of Hope and pray for those mired in despair, those who see no path toward wholeness, those who cannot imagine a light strong enough to pierce the darkness or 'alleluias' glorious enough to illumine the night ...

We have lit the Candle of Peace and pray for every restless heart and every conflicted home, for every community plagued by violence and every land where wars rage. We pray for our own, polarized nation as we seek to move beyond distrust and division and forge a path toward healing ...

We have lit the Candle of Joy and pray for those who feel weary and worn, those who endure this season with heavy hearts because of empty chairs or empty cradles or empty arms, those who feel their lives have lost all sense of purpose ...

We have lit the Candle of Love and pray for all who need reminders of your care — for neighbors alone and lonely and neighborhoods neglected and dreary, for friends who feel forgotten and families stretched and scattered ...

God of Wonder — Love, the Lord, is on the way. Soon we will join the angel chorus in proclaiming good news of great joy as you draw near to bring hope, peace, joy, and love to all people. Help us to receive your Son, and inspire us to work for a world in which hope empowers, peace reigns, joy takes deep root and love abounds. This we ask in the name of the One who comes, the One who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.