

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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“Favor”

A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B)

December 24, 2017

Isaiah 11:1-4b, Luke 1: 26-38

“Good morning, Diane; how are you?” I say to the receptionist at the YMCA,
who stands behind the desk, folding clean towels, while greeting guests,
in the wee hours very early in morning.

To which she invariably replies, “I’m blessed and highly-favored,
and hope you are, as well.”

I love that greeting, because it comes straight out of today’s passage from Luke,
where the angel Gabriel greets Mary saying,

“Greetings, you who are highly-favored. The Lord is with you”.

And I love it, also, because it comes straight out of the African American community,
and their tradition of standing tall by God’s favor or grace,
even in the midst of oppression.

It’s not the greeting one would expect from a people who historically have been
ripped from their families and their roots, exported, sold into slavery,

beaten into submission, impoverished, imprisoned, humiliated,
fire-hosed, disenfranchised, Jim Crowed, and yes, even lynched.

But it is *their* bright and positive greeting, nevertheless:

a greeting of hope in the face of often dire circumstances;

a greeting of trust in the long-bending arc of God's

relationship with God's chosen and highly-favored people.

Diane's greeting is one of those Magnificat moments!

I went to see one of my favorite FPC door-guests on the eve of Thanksgiving, Matthew,

who has been ringing the doorbell at our church for the 15 years

that I have been here, and for quite some time even before that.

The church staff and office volunteers recognize Matthew by his characteristic ring:

ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong – relentlessly, until someone responds.

Now we at the church have beheld Matthew in various stages of being:

beaten up, hungry, cold, wet, in need of a bath and clean clothes,

injured after being hit by a bus, off his meds, on his meds,

tearful or joyful, sad, mad or glad, but always eager to see us,

often arriving at our church door bearing lovely gifts for our church staff.

But when I went to see Matthew on Thanksgiving Eve, to take him a turkey,

which is my custom, I found him in a group home in north Durham,

positively glowing, clean and clean-shaven, well-dressed, happy,
stable, physically well, comfortable, secure and safe.

And he serenaded me when I got out of the car, which is his custom:

a love song, *Unforgettable*, much like Mary's canticle of praise.

And I asked him again why he's been coming to First Presbyterian Church's door
all these years.

To which he answered, "Because you are the ones who show me favor."

Matthew's rationale is also one of those Magnificat moments!

Favor, is a word which shows up twice in Mary's annunciation story:

"Greetings, you who are *highly-favored*, the Lord is with you", and

"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found *favor* with God."

What does that mean to be highly-favored,

and to have found favor with God, I wondered?

I hear it to mean three things according to Mary's story.

First of all, notice all the names that are included in this "particular" narrative:

the angel, Gabriel; the town, Nazareth, the fiancé, Joseph;

the maiden, Mary; the child, Jesus - who will be called

Son of the Most High; the ancestors, David and Jacob;

the cousin, Elizabeth.

All of the characters in this episode are named, men, women, angels and ancestors,
which leads me to surmise that to be favored by God
is to be known and summoned into a relationship with the holy
so familiar, that one is known and called by name.

“You have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name,”

the Lord tells Moses in their tent of meeting (Exodus 33: 17).

“I have called you by name,

and you are mine,” the Lord says to Israel in captivity (Isaiah 43: 1b).

Favor is to be honored by what theologians refer to as *the scandal of particularity*,

which attests that God has broken into human history

in particular places, like Nazareth, at particular times, like the sixth month
of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, and to particular individuals, like Mary.

To be favored by God, is to know that God has chosen to reveal God’s self to you,

particularly; to be on a first name basis with you, specifically;

and to be with you from here on out, through thick and thin, intentionally.

Hence, we also should partake in the scandal of particularity,

and get to know each other and our visitors who ring our doorbell, by name!

The Lord be with you, Mary, with you Diane, with you Matthew.

And also with you.

Secondly, to be favored by God, to be the object of God's favor, is to be gifted
by God with someone, or someones, who will share our joys and our sorrows.

The Lord promises to be with Mary; the Spirit will overshadow Mary;

but Mary will also be graced with a spiritual friend in this holy venture:
her cousin, Elizabeth, who also will know what it is like to bear God-people
into this dark and troubled world.

Elizabeth will rejoice over the same things that cause Mary to rejoice;

Elizabeth will marvel with Mary at the miracles

that cause them both to wonder, *how this can be*;

Elizabeth will worry with Mary over the risks of child birth at their ages,

and the daunting futures their sons will face.;

and Elizabeth will give thanks with Mary over the fact that they have each other,

to entrust with their secrets and to ponder together

concerning *these things*.

God favors both Elizabeth and Mary with a spiritual friend in their callings,

as God also graces us with spiritual companions for our journeys,

causing the Spirit to leap in our inner-most being

when we recognize them as the intended God-gifts which they are.

To be favored by God, is to know that God is with us,

but also to know that our spiritual companions are with us, too:

our "me, too" friends, our veteran friends,
our AA, Al-anon, and NAMI friends, our bereavement friends.

We are not alone!

And lastly, to be favored by God is to be given a holy purpose, a higher calling,
a *raison d'être* in God's coming reign ***of justice and favor for all people.***

This is at the core of Mary's song, and Diane's song, and Matthew's song,
their Magnificats, which proclaim their role in the great gospel reversals
of God's reign: humble to blessed, hungry to rich, lowly to exalted.

So, I want to share with you one more Magnificat moment that recently caught my eye.

This one involves June Scott, mother of Walter Scott,
the man who was gunned down by a police officer
as he fled the scene of a minor traffic violation in
North Charleston, SC in 2015.

Earlier this month, when the indicted police officer, Michael Slager
was sentenced to 20 years behind bars for the crime,
June Scott, the victim's grieving mother, clutched a picture of her son to her heart
as she said to reporters, "My soul rejoices."

That's Magnificat language, friends, in case you don't recognize it!

That's insider jargon signifying to those with ears to hear, that the tide is turning,

and that the justice of God has breached the dam

and is once more on its rivery roll.

It's code talk for the forthcoming reign of God's justice and favor,

not just for the proud and privileged, but *for all people that on earth do dwell.*

Just hours earlier, in the courtroom where Slager was sentenced,

Scott had expressed to the judge how much she misses her son.

And then, immediately turning to face the perpetrator, she said to him,

"but Michael, I forgive you."

To which Slager appeared to mouth the words, "I'm sorry".

June Scott had found her holy purpose in the great reign of God;

and that purpose was to advocate for the marriage of justice and forgiveness.

That was her holy purpose, her higher calling, her mission,

and this will be her hopeful message moving forward.

(Hansen, Victoria. *S.C. Public Radio*. "Walter Scott's Family Hopes Officer Sentencing Sends a Message". December 8, 2017)

Friends, the great gospel reversals of God's bending to earth continue to unfold,

as it becomes manifest in the words, deeds and ministry of gentle Jesus.

And God's kingdom continues to break into our world ever so quietly:

sometimes on angel's wings, sometimes in courtroom whispers of forgiveness,

sometimes in group home camaraderie,
sometimes in the intimate banter between expectant friends,
and yes, in the silent night of a holy birth.

Writer Annie Dillard expresses the incarnation of God in Christ with these words:

*God empties (God's) himself
into the earth like a cloud.
God takes the substance, contours
of a man, and keeps them,
dying, rising, walking
and still walking
wherever there is motion. – Annie Dillard, "Feast Days"*

Friends, the Lord is with us. The Lord is walking with us, still walking,
wherever we notice God's steady pervading force towards shalom on earth.

Immanuel, Jesus, He saves, Son of the Most High,
has come to reveal God's particular favor *for all people*.

May all of our souls rejoice like Mary, in God, our Savior! Amen.

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