

DON'T DO ME ANY FAVORS
Sermon for Advent 4B: Lk 1:26-38
LPC, 12/21/08

The story we hear today from Luke is called the Annunciation because it centers on an announcement. God sends the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary at a very specific address with a message. The message has four parts.

First Gabriel hails Mary, calling her “Favored one,” and telling her that God is with her. Next he tells her she is pregnant with a son who will fulfill all of God’s promises to his ancestor King David and reign forever. Then, in response to Mary’s question, Gabriel says that all this will happen by the miraculous power of God’s Spirit. Finally, to add credence to his message, Gabriel tells Mary that her elder relative Elizabeth, who had been considered past the age of childbearing, is already six months into yet another miraculous pregnancy. Presumably this is offered as proof that nothing is too wonderful for God. If an old woman can become pregnant by God’s intervention, why not a virgin?

Mary’s reaction has always been taken as a paradigm of Christian obedience: something for all Christians to emulate. If we are to look at Mary’s reaction to Gabriel’s message as a pattern for our own behavior, I think it’s worthwhile to take note of two things

First, Mary’s obedience is not instantaneous. She needs a little time to adjust. At first she is confused and, we may assume from Gabriel’s words, afraid. Then she questions what she is hearing, “How can this be?” she asks. I think we can assume that this is not a rhetorical question and that she is genuinely incredulous. Only after much assurance by the angel, does she utter her famous words of acquiescence, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Perhaps, like me, you prefer the King James version, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.”

If Mary’s response to Gabriel is a pattern for us, I think we can infer some things about our own obedience to God. It’s OK to be confused. It’s OK to question and test what appears to be God’s call to us. It’s OK to take some time and seek assurance. The time will come when we need to acquiesce to God and it will go easier for us if, like Mary, we do so with grace, rather than kicking and screaming, but we don’t have to be unquestioning wimps.

The second aspect of the Annunciation I would point out is that the “favor” that God is here bestowing on Mary seems at second glance to be anything but a favor. Mary will be subject to the disgrace of an unwed pregnancy. She will continue to be perplexed by her extraordinary son. Worst of all, she will watch her beloved child grow up and be executed as a criminal.

Favor here is clearly not favor as we understand it in an ordinary sense. God’s favor here is not health, wealth, prosperity and happiness. Then why call it favor?

Mary's favor is that she will carry the Christ within her, knowing God's presence in an unmistakable way. Whatever else she faces she will remember that God performed this miracle and chose her, above all others, to participate. Her very body will bear the marks of God's presence with her till the day she dies.

It may be helpful, if we are to use Mary's obedience as a paradigm, to step back a few steps from her specific situation and consider situations in our own lives where God is calling and bestowing favor, the way God is shown here to bestow favor. In light of the fact that the favor God shows Mary is in worldly terms a small favor, let's consider other situations in which favor seems scant.

Suppose instead of hearing "You are to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit," we hear other kinds of annunciations, as peculiar to us as Mary's was to her.

Can we consider any of the following "annunciations?"

"You're fired."

"Your spouse has left you."

"Someone you hold dear has died."

"You have cancer."

Now, a big difference between these so-called "annunciations" and Mary's, is that God caused the circumstances doled out to Mary, and God *does not* cause cancer, or death, or the demise of a relationship, or loss of work. But just as God called Mary in her pregnancy into God's company as well as into a life of challenge and grief, God calls us into God's presence in our challenges and our grief.

God calls us, like Mary, into God's company. And God bestows God's favor. It may not look like favor any more than Mary's favor looked good to her. But God bestows the same kind of favor on us that God bestowed on Mary. This is the essence of the favor bestowed by God on Mary, and on us: You are bearing Christ. I am with you. I am in you. I will be with you always. Christ is in you now and will be forever.

We know that God does call us to be faithful. One thing that means during the hard slogs we have in life is that sometimes the only thing a person can do is to put one foot in front of the other. Some bad stuff just has to be got through, day by day. God favor does not mean a magic bullet to spirit us instantly out of misfortune. God's favor means presence. Intimate presence. God-with-us presence. God-*in*-us presence.

Whatever you face, know this: Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. You are bearing Christ. God is with you. God is in you. God will be with you always. Christ is in you now and will be forever.