



Roanoke, Virginia

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***“Jesus’ Birth Certificate: (Mother’s Name)”***

Advent Sermon Series Part V

*Luke 1:26-38*

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*<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.*



There is not much said about Mary within the canonical gospels.<sup>1</sup> Outside of the birth narratives and Jesus being presented at the temple, Mary is only mentioned by name when Jesus was rejected in his hometown, at the crucifixion, and then later in Acts when she accompanies the disciples and 100 other women and men in prayer at Pentecost.

Even with limited materials, the four Gospels portray Mary in very different ways. Mark perhaps has a negative view of Mary. As she arrives with other family members when Jesus is preaching at the house, the crowd passes on the message to Jesus that his mother is calling to him to which Jesus responds, “Who is my mother and brother? You are my family, for whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” And Mary remains outside.

Matthew places Mary in the genealogy of the Messiah, in line with 4 other women who act outside the customary patriarchal structure. Yet, Mary never speaks in Matthew and the birth narrative is focused on Joseph.

Luke depicts Mary as a faithful woman, blessed by the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ conception and later at Pentecost. She is the first to respond to the angel’s good news of great joy, and she responds courageously.

And finally, John, never mentions Mary by name, only refers to her as the mother of Jesus. She is mentioned at the beginning and the end, at Cana and at the cross.

Mary as a character is one of divine and diverse understandings. In the annunciation, Mary is described as favored, perplexed, blessed, thoughtful, and afraid. She questions, ponders, believes, and submits to God’s call on her life.

The church’s love and obsession for Mary can be seen in all the names given to her over the course of the first 1500 years of Christianity: *theotokos* (God-bearer), Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, *Nuestra Senora*, Our Mother of Sorrows, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Our Lady of just about every village or town or city—we have our very own Our Lady of the Valley. And yet, in these names comes an image that constellates a whole host of meanings that cannot be communicated logically, let alone understood.

We do have two names other than Mary that are found in our passage, one given and one claimed: Favored One and Servant of the Lord.

What does it mean to be favored? We all have things we favor: foods, tv, shoes, sports teams, music styles. I mean, I even favor my left foot. But this is not at all what it means to have God’s favor. Mary, a betrothed teenager who was pregnant before her wedding date, is going to

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<sup>1</sup> There are extracanonical resources that provide some details beyond what the four canonical gospels tell us. Although they are not reliable resources, they do provide a lens into the perspective of those within the context of when it was written. For more information, look into *The Infancy Gospel of James*, which includes Mary’s birth, childhood, and her betrothal to Joseph.



find that she is “un-favored” by those in her community, and even for a moment “un-favored” by Joseph. Scandal and disdain will ensue. Yet, to this betrothed teenager, the angel visits her and tells her not once, but twice, that she has found favor with God.

It is no small thing to be favored, especially when you are exceedingly aware that you should not be, that you are undeserving, that you are a “nobody” in the eyes of the world, or perhaps a nobody in your own eyes. Mary most likely knew the weight of such a claim, which is why she is “perplexed” and “pondered what this greeting might be.” To have found favor is to have found grace. It is an approval, an acceptance, a blessing. To have found favor is to have been noticed by God. Mary must be thinking: Who me? Why me?

The people who most deserve favor are the ones least likely to assume it. They live in a space of humility, generosity, and compassion, so the focus is never on their own worth and value.

You, Mary, have found favor with God. You have been noticed by God. Yes, you. Mary, the favored one.

We cannot move too quickly from Mary’s favor to the name Mary gives herself in our passage. As Karoline Lewis notes in her commentary, there is a lot of ground we must cover between Gabriel’s “Greetings, favored one,” and Mary’s “Let it be according to your word.” We cannot simply jump from Mary being named “favored” and her response as “servant of the Lord” and paint a picture of obedience and submission.<sup>2</sup> Because in that space, we find another truth about Mary.

Mary is honest. She is perplexed, confused, and even troubled, and she doesn’t try to hide this. She ponders what the angel has just said to her. To ponder here is to debate, to consider different reasons, almost to push back. Again, Mary must be thinking: Me? Who am I to be favored? Who am I to be noticed by God? How can the Lord be with me? She is an ordinary teenager from a nothing town, called “Nazareth.”

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” the angel interjects, You, the ordinary teenager from the nothing town of Nazareth, “have found favor with God and the Lord is with you.” And Gabriel continues, “Even though you are not yet married, and still a virgin, you are going to give birth to the savior of the world, the messiah your people have been waiting for. You will give birth to him. He will be the Son of the Most High, from the lineage of David, with a never-to-end kingdom. You, an unknown girl from an unknown place, will do this very thing. And it will interrupt your life and mess up your plans. Everything you ever knew is going to change. The world is going to change.”

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<sup>2</sup> In her commentary article “To be regarded” submitted to *Working Preacher* on the Luke 1:26-38 for the “Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B)”, 2011: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-luke-126-38>



Ok. Wait. What? “How can this be?”

Well...nothing is impossible with God.

It is in this affirmation that Mary then summons the courage to say, “Here I am, the Servant of the Lord. Let it be according to your word.”

The bridge between Mary’s favor and her response here is her honest wonder and her honest fear. When we consider Mary as a quiet sidebar to the story of Jesus, we miss the power of Yes to God. Mary’s “yes” was not muffled consent that led her into a joyful pregnancy. Her life was immediately interrupted and became a cascade of drama. Philip Yancey says, “often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and Mary embraced both.”<sup>3</sup>

From her first yes to Gabriel here and the birth itself, to her insistence to provide wine at the wedding in Cana, to her last yes at the foot of the cross, and her full presence at Pentecost, Mary is the embodiment of human agency in the narrative of divine liberation.

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As Richard Rohr says, “She is Everywoman and Everyman—Mary is the Great Yes that humanity forever needs for Christ to be born into the world.”<sup>4</sup>

In Mary we find the truest parts of our humanity and the deepest parts of our soul. In and through Mary, we find that we too are favored, we have been noticed by God, and God will do and is doing marvelous things through us.

There is radical transformation that takes this ordinary teenager from peasant girl to prophet, from Mary to Mother of God, from denial and doubt to discipleship and devotion, from “How can this be?” to “Let it be so.” There is radical transformation that takes you from a nobody to a somebody, from forgotten to favored. And the beauty is that it is nothing we did.

Rachel Held Evans, the late public theologian, says that “I am a Christian not because of anything I’ve done but because a teenage girl living in occupied Palestine at one of the most dangerous moments in history said yes—yes to God, yes to a wholehearted call she could not possibly understand, yes to vulnerability in the face of societal judgment . . . yes to a vision for herself and her little boy of a mission that would bring down rulers and lift up the humble, that would turn away the rich and fill the hungry with good things, that would scatter the proud and gather the lowly [see Luke 1:51–53], yes to a life that came with no guarantee of her safety or her son’s.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Zondervan, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith*, 3–5, 6.



Evans continues, “It is nearly impossible to believe God shrinking down to the size of a zygote, implanted in the soft lining of a woman’s womb...growing fingers and toes... kicking and hiccupping in utero... being born covered in blood... crying out in hunger... reaching for his mother’s breasts... resting in his mother’s lap.”<sup>6</sup>

Even God is radically transformed! Well, nothing is impossible with God.

“Before Jesus fed us with the bread and the wine, the body and the blood, Jesus himself needed to be fed, by a woman. He needed a woman to say: ‘This is my body, given for you.’”<sup>7</sup>

Beloved, each and every one of you is noticed by God! You are favored by God, and God intends to do great things in and through you. Just like Mary’s story, our story, individually and collectively, is met with the perfect love of God in the midst of our fear, our struggle, our poverty and weakness, our insecurity and doubt, in and through all the interruptions of life. And just like Mary, each and every one of you also gets the opportunity to respond, to enter that risk, that freedom, that openness; to say ‘yes’ to such love.

Here I am, the servant of the Lord!

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 6.

