

Homily for the Feast of the Annunciation

March 25, 2019 + Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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In the sixth month 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. Luke 1:26-38

*Come, abide within me;
Let my soul, like Mary,
Be thine earthly sanctuary.
Come indwelling Spirit,
With transfiguring splendor;
Love and honor will I render.
Where I go here below,
Let me bow before thee,
Know thee, and adore thee. ¹*



"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

We know these words so well. Even if we are not so literate when it comes to the Bible, we know these words and their context. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin named Mary: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* Before hearing anything more, we know *why* the angel was sent and what was *meant* by 'The Lord is with you.' We've gathered here this evening partly in eager anticipation of hearing these words again. And we have gathered to contemplate the faithfulness of the one to whom they are addressed: Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of God.

Without losing sight of Mary or the pristine original context of this story, we may also wonder how these same words of the angel sound when addressed to us – to you and/or to me: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* [and you ... and you ...]

I was led to imagining this by a writer named Karoline Lewis. She explains that, although the daughter of a low-church Lutheran pastor, *'for various and sundry reasons ... [I] ended up in a Catholic high school ... I remembered being amazed and even surprised when I first attended an Annunciation Day mass at San Domenico School for Girls. I had some sense that as a Lutheran this was neither an event nor day that we acknowledged or celebrated. I was perplexed and considered the rationale for and reasons behind why our classes would start an hour late that day. But the primary image that came to my mind is being surrounded by girls, by my friends, and thinking, God has looked with favor on us. The feeling that I remember from that day in the midst of unfamiliar ritual and religiosity is that God had regarded me.'*

Karoline Lewis goes on to observe, *"It is no small thing to be regarded, to be favored, especially when you are exceedingly aware that you should not be."* ²

Being aware that you should not be favored could be a popular and condensed, although incomplete, view of the season of Lent – temporarily suspended for today's feast. In Lent, we are urged to self-examination and repentance. We mortify the body. *'We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness...'* ³ As popularly imagined and practiced, all this and more can merely reinforce our shame and add to or even multiply our reasons for it.

While there is certainly redemptive value in our genuine self-examination and repentance, we too easily lose sight of the underlying premise of all of it -- that God has favored us and is with us. Mary is certainly blessed among women, but she is not the only or final destination of God's favor. God's desire in Christ for the healing and joy of the world is meant to reach through Mary and through Christ, born of Mary, to you and to me, and to all the communion of saints and, in the end, to all the world.

Tomorrow, you and I will resume our Lenten journey and our Lenten disciplines. Before doing so, I invite you to imagine for a moment sitting alongside of Karoline Lewis at the Annunciation Day mass at the San Domenico School for Girls. Or if you can't go there, imagine for a moment all of the most magnificent divine qualities that you can associate with the Annunciation. And imagine yourself *there*.

Now that you're *there*, I can in faith imagine you, as the words of Gabriel are being addressed to you: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

¹ Hymnal 1982, Hymn #475, Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769)

² *'To Be Regarded,'* Commentary on Luke 1:26-38, 2011, www.workingpreacher.org

³ Book of Common Prayer, page 331