

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Luke 1:26-38 *Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" ²⁹ But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³² "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" ³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷ "For with God nothing will be impossible." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

It's a nightmare I've had many times. You're going about your day as ordinary, seeing the people you know, interacting as usual—suddenly, you look down, and you're not wearing any pants. Whenever I have that dream, I'm usually dreaming that I'm in my house, some church members are visiting when suddenly I realize I'm indecent! I can't tell you how many times Jess has woken me up because I'm sleepwalking and frantically searching around the room for clothes, convinced that there are people there. It's an idea that just kind of terrifies us. Clothes protect our decency, and the idea of being uncovered in this way is mortifying.

Adam and Eve experience that nightmare in real life, when they ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Bible tells us their eyes were opened, and they realized they were naked. Before this, they had nothing to be ashamed of! No guilt, no secrets, no shame. But once they had sinned, their eyes were opened to their shame. God walked through the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve responded with a very natural human reflex: they hid! They were naked, completely exposed before God, yet worse than that—they recognized that their sin lay completely exposed before God as well. And that was the real nightmare.

Now, before one another, we do a good job of covering up with clothing, presenting our best to one another. We also try to cover up our sins, to hide our indecency, the sources of shame and guilt in our lives. But before God, we are completely exposed. Not just what we do, but our very thoughts are laid bare before Him. With this knowledge in mind, it can often lead us to despair before God. "I'm ashamed of what I've done, and I shutter to think at what God thinks of me!" Yes, it's a troubling thought that can leave you feeling entirely unworthy of God's love and fearful of His opinion.

It's likely that Mary, the mother of Jesus, felt the same way as the Angel Gabriel appeared before her. Here was an angel, a holy messenger from the almighty God standing before her. And there she was, a sinner, feeling pretty exposed. But the Angel Gabriel gracefully brings her some words of comfort, words that are true of you as well. He said, in the words of our theme:

Rejoice, Highly Favored One!

I. Rejoice! For you need not fear

II. Rejoice, for your King is near

Mary was not too different from you or me. When we think of her now, of course, she's probably one of the most well-known names in the world. But that wasn't always the case. No, she was like you and me because she was a common, ordinary person. She wasn't a celebrity by any means; she was a poor, young woman from a small town in Galilee in the Northern part of Israel, betrothed to be married to a very ordinary blue-collar worker named Joseph. And the similarities continue when you consider that she was a sinful human being in need of a Savior, just like you and me.

And like any of us would have felt, she was troubled at the sudden appearance of an Angel from God standing in her own home. This was not the first time an angel had appeared to an ordinary person. In fact, this same angel had appeared only six months before this to a relative of hers, Zacharias. He had appeared to Zacharias while the man was serving in the temple, and do you recall Zacharias' reaction? **"He was troubled, and fear fell upon him."** (Luke 1:12) This is mankind's natural reaction when standing before pure holiness. You realize, "I just can't measure up! My sins are exposed before God." Though you might be good at covering up your sins before other *people*, before God, those very sins that you cover up that no one else knows, those sins that eat away at you that if anyone else knew about they'd be appalled—those sins are laid bare before God. And confronting that realization face-to-face is terrifying. And just like Adam and Eve, just like Zacharias, just like we would be, Mary was frightened as she stood there in the presence of holiness.

And yet, Gabriel comforts her with a very foreign idea: **"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."** Favor with God. That's an interesting concept. Does that mean that Mary was God's favorite? That He favored her over others? Some believe that to be true, that Mary was holy and without sin, and so God favored her over all others and chose her for the special task of being the Son of God's mother for that very reason. But no, in fact, Mary wasn't God's favorite, and she wasn't without sin.

We're told that God favored her. Similar wording can be found in Genesis 6, when God decided that He would send a flood to destroy mankind, because He **"regretted that He had made man on the earth."** (Genesis 6:6) But then, a few verses later the Bible says, **"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD."** (Genesis 6:8) Noah was a man that we know was a sinner. God Himself testified, **"The wickedness of man was great in the earth, and . . . every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."** (Gen. 6:5) Noah was in that crowd of evil intentions, and we even know several of Noah's sins as they're described for us in Scripture. And yet, Noah found favor with God, just as Mary did.

Clearly, to be favored by God is not the result of something we do. Favor with God is solely in God's corner. It's simply undeserved love that the Angel is speaking about. So, he calms her fears and says, **"Do not be afraid, Mary. Though you don't deserve it, you have found grace and favor in the eyes of God!"**

Boy, wouldn't it be nice to have that assurance delivered to you. Well, in reality, the same can be said of you! Do not be afraid, rather rejoice! Because though you feel unworthy of God's love, though your sins lay exposed before God, though He knows even your deepest, darkest secrets that gnaw at you night and day—you need not fear. For you have found grace and favor with God in Christ.

Now, maybe you can relate with this feeling. I've been putting off going to the dentist for a long time now. It's not that I don't like dentists or having my teeth cleaned, it's that possibility of finding out some bad news—like I have a few cavities, or I haven't been flossing enough. The dreaded possibility of finding out some sort of bad news from the dentist has been enough to cause me to stay away for longer than I'd like to admit.

And I think the temptation exists to treat God in the same way. When you find yourself falling into the same sins every day, you tend to store up all your guilt deep inside you, and it causes you to just dread looking at God's Word—or even praying to God—because you're scared of what you might see. You dread the thought of having to confront some bad news about yourself, and it's easier to just try to avoid the situation all-together. That's a fear that's been true of many of us many different times.

And yet, in spite of that, God comforts you. He says, *"Do not fear, rather rejoice, highly favored one!"* Christ Himself gives you reason to rejoice, when He says to you, ***"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*** (Luke 12:32) Let those words from Your Savior assure you that before God, you have NO reason for fear! Not because of your sin, not because of your unworthiness—there is no reason to be afraid. For Christ came to take away God's punishment from you. He came as *your* substitute, so now it's true that you too have found favor with God. Jesus *for you* is the evidence of that favor.

As God has given you His Kingdom through His Son Jesus, it's time to consider that King who would be born in a barn in Bethlehem. Picking up at verse 31 of our text: ***"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."*** This talk of a never-ending Kingdom is the fulfillment of the promise first given to King David, when God assured him, ***"Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me. Your throne shall be established forever."*** (2 Samuel 7:16) This was a promise of global importance, once delivered to Israel's greatest King, later sung about in the Psalms, and now, that same promise is being proclaimed to whom? It's being sung in the small town of Nazareth, before an audience of one—this very ordinary young woman named Mary.

Things were shaping up just as they'd been prophesied through the mouth of Isaiah, ***"The Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel."*** (Isaiah 7:14) This is an altogether unheard of thing: a virgin giving birth to a child? And not just any child, but the very Son of God? They would call Him Immanuel, which is literally translated, "God with us." God with us! That's a theme that is frequently repeated throughout the Gospel of Luke. That was first promised to Mary by Gabriel in v. 28, ***"Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you!"*** And God was quite literally with Mary, as she carried the Son of God in her womb.

But God is also with *you* as well today! Just like Mary, there's nothing special about you that should cause God to want to be present with you. And yet, Jesus promised *you* as His disciples, ***"Behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*** (Matthew 28:20) Elsewhere, He assures you, ***"Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them."*** (Matthew 18:20) Yes, Jesus, that King who was promised thousands of years ago, spoken of to Kings, sung about in Psalms, announced by angels—HE is with you. He's still here, reigning as the King triumphant over your sins and over death itself.

Now, this whole account with Gabriel and Mary is set in contrast with the previous account of Gabriel and Zacharias. Zacharias was approached by the angel and was promised that his wife, who was very old, would bear him a child. Zacharias was a priest, and as such, he knew well of the many accounts from Scripture where this exact same arrangement had taken place. He knew of old Abraham and Sarah being promised the birth of Isaac, he knew of Manoah and his barren wife who were promised the birth of Samson, and he knew of Elkanah and his wife Hannah, whose womb the Lord had closed, yet He gave her the gift of a son, Samuel.

Zacharias knew the history, no doubt he had preached on these lessons before. And yet, when Zacharias was promised the birth of a son, he had a moment of weakness. He had faith, but at this moment his Old Adam showed up, and he doubted whether God would do the same thing for him. **“How shall I know this?”** he asked. (Luke 1:18) He was asking for a sign to prove that these things were actually true of *him*.

In contrast, when Mary was promised the birth of a son in an entirely new way, that is, a child born of a virgin, she asked for no sign. She simply asked, **“How can this be?”** A simple question, how would it take place. And finally, she ended, **“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”** Why was it that Mary could respond in such a way? Was she just a better person? Was she perhaps naïve to the way conception worked? The answer is that she was responding in faith. She simply trusted that if God said it, it must be so.

What about you? Sure, when you examine the evidence of your life, it can seem hard to believe that God would think anything other than deep regret at forming you. When you hear the words of forgiveness from your Savior, it’s easy to respond in doubt like Zacharias did, **“How shall I know this?”** “How could this possibly be true of me? I know Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, but it seems hard to believe that it would be God’s good pleasure to forgive me for what *I’ve* done.”

If you’ve felt that way, running up against doubt like Zacharias, I want you to take comfort in one line from Gabriel’s lips. Referring to Elizabeth being pregnant in her old age, he announced, **“With God nothing will be impossible.”** The God who was able to give a son to a woman in her old age, the God who brought about the miraculous conception of the Son of God in the womb of a young virgin—hey, it’s pretty clear, with Him nothing is impossible. And that’s true for you as well. Though your past, your guilt, your sin might seem impossible to overcome—with God nothing will be impossible. In fact, He’s already taken care of it all. Jesus had responded with similar words to His disciples when they asked with despair how anyone could hope to be saved. He responded, **“With man, this is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.”** (Matthew 19:26)

So yes, it can seem like a nightmare thinking about all of our sins and being aware that God knows every one of them. By rights, we deserve death, we deserve to stand before the King and receive only punishment. But rather than this nightmare, God presents to you today a different reality. He tells you to **“Rejoice, Highly Favored One!”** How can this be? Well, it’s because with God, it is possible for wretched sinners like you and me to stand before God and find favor in His eyes. With God, it is possible for us to believe in the King who was born to save us from our sins. With God, it is possible for us to not resort to fear, but rather to rejoice. So, **“Rejoice, Highly Favored Ones.”** In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh
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