

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Unlikely Vessels

2 Samuel 7

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After three weeks of darkness and light and warnings and hope of better days to come . . .after stories of prophets in the cities, prophets in the hills, prophets in the wild . . .after ranging with Israel through Exodus to exile... after all the stories have all been told, the fourth Sunday of Advent, and all of history with it, brings us into the intimate setting where an angel of the Lord appears to a bewildered young girl named Mary, “Greeting, favored one! The Lord is with you.” As one would typically be, Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Well, what sort of greeting is it? What is it to be told, you are favored, the Lord is with you? That’s an important question because that message is at the heart of God’s message to each of us too. What would you need to believe to receive a word from God like that: you are favored, you are beloved. The Lord is with you. Thinking about that helps us appreciate Mary’s faith and her courage, and it also may help us hear the good news for each of us at a time when that message can get lost in the darkness or in grief or in shame or in doubt or in despair. What would you need to believe about the words or about yourself or about God to believe that message and let it change your life?

I think Henri Nouwen’s life purpose was to communicate that message especially to people who showed the most resistance to really believing it about themselves. *You are beloved, the Lord is with you.* He said it over and over and lived it in his shared life with the physically disabled at L’Arche. At Eugene Peterson’s funeral, his son eulogized him by telling that his famous father had everyone fooled that he was always coming up with something fresh: “You’ve been duped. For 50 years he’s been saying the same thing to all of us: ‘God loves you. He’s on your side. He’s coming after you. He’s relentless.’”

That’s hard to believe sometimes. We might reject it. But here’s Mary who hears just that same word of grace and is able to respond in faith, “Here I am, let it be to me according to your word”

What sort of greeting must this be to able to respond: let it be to me according to your word? When we try to make sense of that, we hold that affirmation up against the cold, hard realities of the world and wonder, ‘if this is beloved, I’d hate to be non-beloved. If this is the Lord is with me, I’d hate to see The Lord not with me.’ Our small spiritual selves tend to equate good things in life with God’s blessing. And when times are hard, we think God is either punishing us or is absent. But maturing spiritual selves know this is just not true. Scripture witnesses to this over and over. Elise taught us this last Sunday evening in our Advent Study. God is the God of light, but God is also the God of darkness. God created the light, but God created darkness too. It’s all His. Darkness is not the absence of God; it’s often when we learn to walk in faith. So, the psalmist confesses: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me,

your rod and your staff comfort me.” And again, “Even the dark is not dark to you, the dark lights up like the day.”

To believe you are beloved, and I am with you, is to believe a promise that transcends circumstances, not interprets them.

We wonder what kind of greeting this is, and then we may wonder what kind of person am I to receive such a greeting. Am I worthy of this? How could I be? What sort of person must I be to be blessed by God?

Does the favor of God rest on those who have earned it? Is it an achievement award for good behavior or good works or good potential? Mary’s life has been romanticized in just these ways. It’s how we make sense of her. God must have chosen her because of her uniquely potent righteousness. That’s how people make sense of this choosing of Mary: she must have been especially holy for God to choose her. She’s not like the rest of us, you or me. She’s different.

I have no problem honoring Mary, but this way of honoring Mary misses the point. The potency of Mary isn’t her exemplary character as a model of what God can do with someone who is holy. Everything we know about her is her simplicity, her openness, her humility. Luke’s Gospel goes through great detail: a town in Galilee called Nazareth, a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. Luke tells us more about their address than their character. We hear as much about Joseph as we do Mary. The Gospel story is not God deifying a superior righteous human. It’s God greeting an unlikely vessel with the Gospel, “you are beloved. The Lord is with you.”

Can you believe that about yourself? I think that preachers in some generations in the past felt like people most needed to be humbled from their arrogance and self-righteousness. The job of proclamation of the Gospel was to knock proud people down a notch or two so they could begin to understand their salvation doesn’t come from their own strength or their own doing but by the grace of God. In the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards mastered this by telling his congregation that God’s wrath is only stayed from destroying them by the grace of Christ the Mediator: “You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.” It’s a powerful word to sinners in the hand of an angry God. That was the message of that sermon and so many others: you are worthless, you are no good to anyone. Even the best thing you do is dirty rags. Only Christ saves you.

Do we still need that message that way? Some days, I suppose we do, if we put trust in ourselves and faith in ourselves for our salvation. We definitely need to hear about Christ’s salvation and there’s a place for humility for sure, but it seems to me nowadays as I talk with people, preachers hardly need to utter a word about the depravity of human beings. Every other voice out there is already telling you you’re worthless, and you’re listening to them. Social media in theory was supposed to help people feel connected, but studies show it has the

opposite effect. Social media often makes people feel more alone. Studies show that young people's happiness and self-identity is directly an inverse correlation with how much time they spend consuming social media. If you want to be happy throw your phone in the ocean, is what researchers tell us. If you want to be miserable, keeping scrolling and swiping, and you're just about guaranteed to get there.

It's not the only message telling us this, but it is one of the most potent and powerful. We can get messages of our deficiencies from lots of sources, but we can only get the Gospel message of our redemption from one source. It may be that God's message to Mary is just exactly what we need to hear over and over again now in the face of all the voices of darkness tearing us down, that message that says you are beloved, The Lord is with you. Even you. Yes you. God would move heaven and earth to get to you. As it happened, what God did was move one young girl's heart to be the bearer of Emmanuel, God with us.

Which leads us finally toward the question that takes us to the heart of it all. This isn't about you, or me, or even Mary. What do you believe about God? What sort of God must this be love you and to be with you no matter whether you're a somebody, and no matter all the ways you think you're a nobody?

Our reading from 2 Samuel tells us something important about God's character. King David wanted to do something great for God. I live in a cedar house but God stays in a tent. I'll build a temple for God. But sometimes God takes away your plans, your dreams, the future you imagine for yourself and leaves you with only the invitation to trust and walk by faith even in the dark.

David wasn't wrong about the desire to build God a temple, but it would have to come later. Whole chunks of the Old Testament would give instructions to future generations about the details of temple construction, but God had a different plan for David. Your legacy will not be about what you do for me; it will be what I do for you. Others will build the nation and the temple, but the spiritual and theological foundation they build on will forever more be that you do not construct a world for me; I create for you; I create you; I come to you; I protect you; I provide for you.

You don't need to build me a Temple to live in. I'm already here. David, I have always been with you, when you were a nobody shepherd in the pasture and when you were an afraid boy running for your life. I was with you as you rose to kingship and achieved more than you ever thought possible in your life, and I am with you now in all that stirs within you. Any building you build for me does not make me more with you than I already am. You will not be the one to build me a house; instead I will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.

I feel like this year has been full of that kind of thing for a lot of us. So much we thought for sure in our own plans has been taken away. Sometimes we've only been left with the space to trust in God for today and the days to come. David wanted to build God a house. Perhaps we can understand that as people who are about to expand our church grounds and dust off

conceptual master plans for the church campus. There have been some dreams around here, some really beautiful dreams about building God a house for God's people. I can totally imagine David lying in bed at night dreaming with excitement about what might be possible.

But then for him, no, first learn to trust in me. You will not build me a house David; I will make you a house. In other words, God's presence is with God's people long before the buildings people make, and God's presence is still with the people when the buildings are closed and the people are dispersed, and God's presence is still with the people when the buildings turn to rubble as they all must. God's favor is for people, as one children's book puts it: big people, little people, fat people, thin people, mommies and daddies and children, too. God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless.

It's the message that grounds every major covenant in Israel's history:

Noah...

Abraham...

Moses...

David...

You are beloved. I am with you, and will be with you in whatever comes.

And it is this same message that arrives in the annunciation and adds Mary's name to the top of the list of those who have carried God's grace by their faith. You are beloved. I am with you. What must I believe about God to receive this greeting? Only this: God never fails. God is not afraid of the dark or of death. God is on your side and is coming for you, and God is relentless.

You are beloved. The Lord is with you.

May you have faith and courage to say, even when it feels like you have a mouth full of marbles: Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

According to your word...

According to your love...

According to your character...

Whatever you will, I am your servant; my life, my all, is in your hands. I trust you.

In thanksgiving and honor for the God-bearer Mary, and in encouragement of all of you who bear the Gospel of Jesus Christ in your lives in these days of grief and joy, in darkness and light. Amen.