

“Grace for Everyone”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Luke 1:26-38

With all due respect, there is absolutely no evidence in Luke’s gospel to support the idea that Mary was anyone special. That can be hard to accept, knowing what we now know. But it’s true. Out of the blue, an angel came to a teenager living in a small town in the middle of nowhere, engaged to a man about whom Luke tells us basically nothing. We’re given no indication that Mary was particularly pious or wise beyond her years. What the archangel Gabriel told her was simply “you have found favor with God.”

Now Gabriel arrives in “the sixth month,” as it says in the opening verse of the passage we just heard. That may seem a bit mysterious if you aren’t familiar with the back story. One of Mary’s relatives, probably a cousin, named Elizabeth, had conceived a child whose name would be John, and he would grow up to pave the way for the Messiah by calling people to repent of their sins through the waters of baptism. Elizabeth was well beyond normal child-bearing years, and until God’s intervention, she suffered the opprobrium of a culture that thought women without children had been afflicted for some grievous flaw. Elizabeth, as Gabriel tells Mary, is in her sixth month of pregnancy.

So here are two women. One, Elizabeth, blessed with child under unusual circumstances after a lifetime of guilt. The other, Mary, informed that she will bear the Son of God under very unusual circumstances, which could bring her great shame and possibly even death by stoning. Neither seems like a choice candidate from anything we’ve been told. However, Mary does acquit herself well during the angelic visitation, readily agreeing to be “the servant of the Lord.”

Most of us, confronted by an archangel, would run away screaming or check ourselves into the nearest mental health institution.

None of this is intended to denigrate Mary or Elizabeth. I venerate both. In fact, I often wonder if Gabriel might have visited others before descending upon Mary. Imagine a frustrating sequence of failures featuring frightened people who said, “No way. Please leave. I can’t do that.” The point is God decides. God takes the initiative. God chooses who will bring life and light and love into the world, and God is not slumped over a desk shuffling resumes and references while He figures out who’s going to do it. God selects whom he favors, and what the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ firmly states is that God favors everyone, though he does take great delight in people who say “Yes,” like Mary did.

What this means for us is that every person here, and many who are not, we are all prospective Mary’s. (I hope the men are secure enough in your masculinity to handle this.) We are all prospective Mary’s! This doesn’t mean that the archangel Gabriel is going to come down and say, “Boom! You’re pregnant, and this kid will knock your socks off!” But it does mean that in unexpected ways, each of us whom God favors, each of us has a role to play in bringing the Kingdom of God into the world. And it doesn’t depend on how many times you pray every day, though frequent prayer is a good thing, and it doesn’t rely on how diligently you study scripture, though being biblically literate is a thing to be prized. It all hinges on God’s grace, working through us, if we accept it and share it.

And that’s the funny thing about grace. It’s freely given, no strings attached, but we rightly suspect that if we accept grace, we’re going to get wrapped up in it. It makes us scared, especially those of us who like to be in control, and often we can’t believe that we’re worthy. And that last one is a good point, because we aren’t worthy. Not a single one of us. But God

delivers grace to those whom he favors, and as we have seen, throughout scripture, grace is not about deserving. Consider David, whom we heard about earlier: the youngest son, a shepherd-by, who grew up to suffer certain . . . peccadilloes. We also heard the concluding verses from Paul's Letter to the Romans. Before he converted to faith in Jesus, Paul was forcing Christians from their home and making their lives miserable. It's not about deserving. It is about God's love for us, a love so fierce it makes the surface of the sun feel like a walk-in freezer.

So I encourage you: accept the grace! Do it! Look for it. Hope for it. Pray for it. And when it comes, shout "Hallelujah," and let it carry you away. Don't think about. Don't mull over it. That will just arouse your fears and make you push grace away. Do like Mary did. She didn't tell Gabriel, "Well, if you could come back tomorrow after I've had a chance to sleep on it and give it some consideration." No, she made an intuitive leap of faith, and we too need to humbly accept the grace, no matter how radical or life-changing, as "a servant of the Lord." For that is what we are: blessed servants born to it as beloved children of God; bred to it by faith as members of the Body of Christ.

Now I know that plenty of people are thinking, "That's great, but what does this mean for me from day to day." I'd love to tell you, because if I could that would make me the smartest person on the planet, but I can't, because I don't know. And you don't either. It's like a woman who's never been pregnant pretending to know what it's like to be pregnant. It's like a father assuming that he knows what it is to be a father before the baby's born. It's like someone who's never touched a cello thinking they know what it's like to be Yo-Yo Ma creating music. We won't know – you and I – until the grace arrives and we accept it, and then Lord have mercy watch out.

But we can all recognize grace when it happens, and that helps prepare us. Grace, of course, can be easy to miss, if we aren't paying attention, but sometimes, the grace is so great that it smacks us awake, and we notice. Think about a time you've witnessed God's grace being born. Think about a situation you've experienced that was pregnant with the presence of grace about to burst forth. It might have been something small, or something great. But whatever that manifestation of grace, know that God has chosen you for something similar yet different. We can't copycat grace, but we know it when we feel it, and that helps us recognize when God has favored us with a gift of grace.

The main thing to remember about grace is that it's like the manna God gave the Israelites in the wilderness. It spoils if it's not used in a timely fashion. When you receive grace, and notice the carefully chosen word "when" instead of "if," *when* you receive grace, let it out. If you don't, you're going to feel like a pregnant woman who just can't give birth, and I'm not talking about a few weeks late. I'm talking about the tenth month and the eleventh month. When God favors you with grace, share it, and don't be afraid, despite the fact that it might be weird. There's already plenty of weird in the world, and it's the wrong kind of weird. We need more of the right kind of weird, God's kind of weird. So just go with God, and let it roll, because you can do it, not because you're magnificent, but because God decided to make you magnificent through grace.

Now I know there may be some resistance to this notion of grace for everybody, but if you don't believe me, read the Bible and remember Mary and Elizabeth. Everybody, including Elizabeth herself, thought that she had screwed up something awful, but God didn't look at it that way. Mary was nobody: a redneck hick from a no-place called Nazareth who hadn't even lived

long enough to do anything worth writing down by the gospel writers. Yet God said, “Yep, those are my gals.”

Mary and Elizabeth, two testaments to the truth that God will work grace through you, if only you accept and share it. Doesn't matter what other people think. Doesn't really matter what you think as long as you're willing at the crucial moment to say yes, and let life – real, abundant, everlasting life – take its course. Amen.