

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

December 20, 2020 – ADVENT 4, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Chosen by God*”

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (The Lord urges King David to build a ‘house’ for Him)  
Canticle 3 (“The Magnificat” proclaimed by the Blessed Virgin Mary)  
Romans 16:25-27 (God sent Jesus to bring about faith and obedience to God)  
St. Luke 1:26-38 (The Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear the Messiah)

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I don’t know about you, but I *hate* surprises. I’m also not comfortable with people showing up at my home unannounced. Moreover, I don’t cope very well with radical changes in my life. So, I strongly empathize with a young Palestinian woman who lived 2,000 years ago, who was the recipient of *all of these*—a huge surprise, an unexpected guest, and a change in her life that would affect not only the rest of history, but also, all of eternity!

Mary was just becoming accustomed to her engagement to a carpenter who represented a steady income and honest work. Her upcoming marriage to Joseph—an established professional—also likely represented an improvement in her social standing. Then suddenly, an angel appears in her house—not just any low-ranking angel, but one of God’s *Archangels*, Gabriel. He greets her with these astonishing words: “Greetings, O favored one! The Lord is with you.” It would be frightening enough to see an Archangel, but there’s also the issue that he appears as a *man*. Jewish women were forbidden to speak to men outside of their family, so this situation would be unnerving for Mary on a cultural level, as well.

Unlike what occurs in other Bible stories, *this* angel doesn’t ask for a drink from the well, or the washing of his feet, or even directions to the nearest inn. He came only to speak with Mary. And, he greets her not as a slave, or a woman, or even as an equal—but as the favored one whom God has chosen. What must it have been like for her to be face-to-face with the chief messenger of Almighty God, the Lord of all power and might? It makes sense that Mary would have been quite startled, or “much perplexed,” as today’s Gospel says.

The angel’s words sound as strange to us as they did to Mary. Like her, we may find these words peculiar. We may ponder in our hearts what sort of greeting this might be. But like Mary, after hearing these words, we, too, will come to rejoice in them.

“Greetings, favored one!” is good news for everyone. Those who lean toward a more Catholic view can revel in this veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To her title, the Eastern Orthodox also add: Mother of God. Those who prefer the Protestant perspective can take comfort in Gabriel’s message of God’s grace. Feminists note that the willing assent of a woman was necessary for the whole plan of Salvation. And those who are of a patriarchal mindset insist that the angel—who, after all, appeared as a *male*—set the whole thing in motion. Humanists delight that a *homo sapiens* vessel could contain God. Believers claim authority for the divinity of Christ. Skeptics repeat the words, “How can this be?” Optimists find hope in the angel’s words: “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

But, perhaps most important, following Mary’s example, each of us is invited to accept God’s call upon *our* lives—our vocations, ministries, and work, our hopes and dreams—as we, too, proclaim: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

Looking at how Mary responded to God, Christian people everywhere can take courage to let go and take the plunge, responding to God’s messenger with the only words we can utter that will help carry out God’s plan of salvation: “Let it be with me according to Your Word.”

Today’s Gospel lesson reminds each of us that God loves us—every one of us. And, that God has a message, a plan, and a purpose, for each one of us. *Every believer* is the favored one of God, whether you feel like it nor not. His plans for us include the wonderful reversals for which Mary praises God in “The Magnificat”—to scatter the proud in their conceit; to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly; to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

At this time of year, we tend to think of “The Magnificat” as being sung by a well-rehearsed choir in a historic cathedral, during a perfectly presented Evensong liturgy by upper middle-class clergy. No question, this kind of seasonal worship *is* beautiful!

But when we stop and think about the kingdom of God that Mary proclaims her Son, the Messiah, will bring about, it's actually downright seditious, politically charged, and highly volatile—even today.

Think of the tremendous controversy that Pope Francis ignited when he elected not to live in the Papal Palace or wear the mandatory and very expensive handmade red shoes every Pope has worn. Instead, he opted for comfortable old loafers. Moreover, much like Jesus, Pope Francis has verbally challenged many of the elitist and partisan ideas of the religious establishment. Humility, simplicity, truth, and an identification with those who have less (or nothing) make our culture and those in power nervous.

Yet, if we believe in the truth of Scripture, God will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. He will fill the hungry with good things, send the rich away empty, and scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts. And, if we are to imitate Mary, we should actually *pray for* these revolutionary changes.

Now, I don't believe in preaching politics from the pulpit, so don't worry. No specific causes or parties will be mentioned today. But how can we hear these texts from the Gospel we hold so dear and *not* feel called to engage with the social, political, cultural, and economic realm? Because poverty, oppression, hunger, injustice, untruth, along with violence and war, *are* religious issues. They have ethical and moral implications—and Jesus had a lot to say about them! If we, like Mary, are also the favored ones chosen by God, He is enlisting us in the cosmic struggle for good over evil, to help make the world a better place for all His children.

The God we worship is not a far-off tyrant who punishes bad behavior from a lofty paradise by sending down thunderbolts. He is not the sort of deity who simply *imagines* what it must be like to be human. No. Through Mary's obedience, God took on flesh and dwelt among us. In Jesus, God became fully a human being, with flesh and bones, one who hurt and cried, laughed and sang, who loved and had compassion. One who knew loneliness, rejection, misunderstanding, and suffering, so that God could understand us from the inside out. Because of Jesus, no longer are we separated from an omnipotent judge, pleading for mercy.

For God is among us, "with us," *Emmanuel*. He comprehends us fully and intimately. He knows what it's like to feel the power of being attracted to the dark side, or how we can be enticed by glittering images; what is involved in struggling to resist temptation; or even to recognize the difference between divine light and the alluring glow of wickedness.

This is the message of the angel Gabriel to Mary, and to us: God understands us, God loves us, God forgives us, and God chooses us as His own. Perhaps our inability to accept this message, to fully believe we truly are God's favored ones, accounts for our unwillingness to cooperate with God's plan for us, at times.

It can be far more comfortable for us to store up treasure for ourselves than to ensure that all human beings have their rightful share in the earth's bounty. It may be more expeditious to command armies to annihilate those whom we believe are evil, than to eradicate the roots of injustice. During the holiday season, it is far easier to engage in "retail therapy" than to confront the painful possibility that *we* may be the rich whom God will send away empty.

And so, God has given us a sign: A young woman is with child. And she shall bear a son, and name Him Jesus—meaning, "one who saves." He will be great; and He will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. And He shall be *Emmanuel*—"God with us." For *nothing* will be impossible with God!

That last encouragement is something we need to focus on *daily*, as we struggle through these dark times of illness, death, economic disaster, and political division and unrest. We need the good news of Christmas more than ever. And that begins by putting our faith in the words of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary, which are intended for each of us, as well: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."<sup>1</sup>

May we have the courage to look each other in the eye, or tell each other on the phone: "Like Mary, you, too, are chosen by God. And like her, God's Holy Spirit is upon you; you are of enormous value to God, for in you and through you, the Lord has chosen to make His grace, favor, and love known in this world. Yes, *you* are the one chosen by God."<sup>2</sup> Hallelujah! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. J. Barrington Bates, "Greetings, Favored Ones!" 20 December 2014, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/greetings-favored-ones-advent-4-b-2014/) <<https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/greetings-favored-ones-advent-4-b-2014/>>. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Drew Downs, "Rethink the Gospel for Advent B—Who is Mary?" 19 December 2017, [DrewDowns.net](https://drewdowns.net) <<https://drewdowns.net/2017/12/19/rethink-gospel-advent-4b/>>. Used with permission.