

Invited to Wonder

Forth Sunday in Advent

December 24, 2017

In just a few minutes, we will baptize Charlotte and Jack. After we promise to support them in their life in Christ, after we pour the water, after we anoint them with oil we will pray and ask God to give them four things –

An inquiring and discerning heart

The courage to will and persevere

A spirit to know and to love you

The gift of joy and wonder in all your works.

In short, we will ask God to make them a lot like Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mary had an inquiring and discerning heart. When Gabriel told her she would bear a son who would reign over the house of David forever, the first words out of her mouth were a question. She inquired “How can this be?” She wanted to know and discern more.

She had the courage to will and persevere. It took courage to submit to this divine invitation. Once she said yes, she persevered in her promise.

She had a spirit to know and love God. Her response to this invitation came from seeing herself as God’s servant. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

She had the gift of joy and wonder. Her heart overflowed with the song of thanksgiving we sang earlier, marveling at what God was doing in her life. She knew this to be in keeping with what God always did. God was always casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly like her. God was always filling the hungry with good things, including her.

All of this filled her with wonder. After the birth of Jesus, after the angels and the shepherds, Luke’s gospel tells us Mary treasured all of these things and pondered them in her heart. She was wonder-full.

We do not know if Mary was ever baptized. Maybe she was among the crowds who gathered around John the Baptist. We don’t know. But the message from the angel was similar to what we affirm in baptism: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was a poor girl from backwater town called Nazareth. Her parents were probably peasants. Her house is thought to have been a cave. She was a young woman in a time when women were

often treated like disposable property. She was so poor, she and Joseph were not able to give the traditional lamb as an offering of thanksgiving for the birth of a son. Luke's gospel tells us they had to resort to the exception for those living on the edge – a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

But the angel called her favored.

In baptism, we acknowledge God's favor toward us all. Baptism does not create this favor. Baptism does not increase the favor God bestows on us. How do you add to what is already infinite? From the first day of creation, God has called it all good. But we so easily forget we are divinely favored. We let the world tell us we are something less. We lose sight of who we are in God's sight. We forget the love bestowed on us from the foundation of the world. So baptism grounds us in God's favor, not for God's sake but for ours.

And by acknowledging God's favor toward us, we are freed and compelled to acknowledge God's favor toward everyone. Those most likely to forget God's favor toward others are those who fail to see it in themselves. Those who forget they are loved and valued by God are more likely to deny that gift to others. But when we know God favors us, with God's help, we can promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons and respect the dignity of every human being. Like Mary, we can bring the spirit and life of Christ to birth in our world.

Howard Thurman was a brilliant theologian. He was a classmate of Martin Luther King, Sr. and mentored his friend's son, Martin Luther King, Jr. He is sometimes thought of as the godfather of the civil rights movement. His grandmother had been born into slavery. In his classic book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he described the importance of knowing God's favor. He wrote, "This was drilled into me by my grandmother. The idea was given to her by a certain slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves. How everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when, in her recital, she would come to the triumphant climax of the minister: "You – you are not slaves. You are God's children." This established for them the ground of personal dignity."

Baptism establishes in our bodies and minds and souls the ground of personal dignity. We are God's children, highly favored.

Then the angel said another wonder-full thing. After, "Greetings, favored one," the angel said, "The Lord is with you."

Mary already knew this. You don't agree to bear the Son of God into the world without having some kind of relationship with God. But her mystical moment with the angel confirmed what she already knew deep within. She would never forget the Lord was with her. At the birth, in the stable of a roadside inn of all places, when the Magi came to visit them at home, when adolescent Jesus got lost in the Temple, when her son began his ministry and people thought he had lost his mind, when she watched his agony on the cross, when she heard that he was risen, Mary still heard these words of the angel. The Lord is with you.

When we anoint Charlotte and Jack, we will say “You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” For the rest of our lives we know this to be true. No matter what comes, this is who we are. We are favored by God and marked as his own forever.

Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.

During Advent we have been thinking about invitation – God’s invitation to us, and how we share that invitation with others.

I know you know someone who needs to hear that he or she is favored by God. I know you know someone who needs to know the Lord is with you no matter what.

Baptism gets this good news into our souls. Eucharist reinforces it. The sacraments take us into a place of wonder where the reality of God can reach us and touch us and bring to life something new inside of us.

We may not see the angel, but we still hear the good news. Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you, too. Amen.