

Does God Play Favorites?

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Luke 2:1-14

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

GOD'S FAVORITES

Did you catch that last verse, verse 14?

The angels said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who he favors!" That's the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

That wasn't the version I heard as a child. When we read the Christmas story verse 14 read, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." I like the King James Version better. Except for it's male dominated language (good will toward men) it is more inclusive.

In the King James Version God's good will is not limited. We all get God's good will and peace.

But, unfortunately King James Version is a bad translation from a later text. In layman's terms that means the New Revised Standard Version really is new and improved when it comes to this verse.

Conservatives and liberals agree on this one. This is a more accurate translation.

But, what are we going to do with this message?

What does it mean when we talk about those whom God favors?
Does God really play favorites?

Whom does God favor and why? And what kind of peace does God bring to those whom God favors?

The text gives us a clue.

GOD FAVORS MARY

First, the Bible tells us that God favors Mary.

That was the message this past Sunday. The angel came and gave Mary the news. He said, "Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you."

Now Mary was a bit suspicious and a bit afraid of this stranger. Who could blame her? Nobody talks like this angel guy. Who says "greetings"?

If someone would come up and say to me, "Greetings favored one", I would be afraid too. Or at least I would be a bit suspicious!

But, the angel went on to tell her not to be afraid and also to explain why he was there.

God had chosen Mary to bear His Son, the Messiah.

What was her response? “You’ve got to be kidding! How can this be? I’m not married yet. This is impossible.”

The angel persisted. He finally said, “With God nothing is impossible.”

Now theoretically we all know that’s true. God is God and God can do anything. But, most of us are reluctant to believe news that sounds too good to be true.

And yet Mary believed.

I don’t know why she believed. I would have had a lot more questions for this angel guy. But, Mary believed. Like the prophets of old she simply said, “Here I am. Send me.”

THE BIRTH

And so in tonight’s lesson we meet Mary, the favored one again.

She’s on the road with Joseph. They are going to Bethlehem to register so that they can pay their taxes to Caesar. (And you thought filling out that W-2 was a pain. Caesar made it into a pilgrimage!)

Anyway, Mary, the favored one is expecting a child any day now. Again, I personally prefer the King James translation. Mary was “great with child.” Some of you know exactly what that’s like to be great with child.

That was Mary.

And Mary was so great with child that she delivered her child right then and there.

She didn’t deliver her child in a hospital or even in a clean warm home. No, the favored one delivered her child in a stable, wrapped

him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for the animals.

The Bible tells us that there was no room for them in the inn.

GOD WITH US IN THE MANGER

How can this be? Why was the King of kings born in a manger? If Mary was God's favored one, why did God allow her to give birth in such humble circumstances?

Apparently being favored by God does not take us out of difficult circumstances. Instead, being favored by God means that God is with us in those circumstances.

God chose to favor a young unwed mother. And the humble nature of his Son's birth became not a stumbling block but a beacon of hope.

In the birth of our Savior we learn that God is present in the most godforsaken places. The glory of God shines brightly in the lives of those who are oppressed and broken.

Whom does God favor?
God favors those who give birth in a stable.
God favors Mary.

GOD FAVORS THE SHEPHERDS

There's a second group that God favors.
God favors the shepherds.

The Bible tells us that the shepherds were just minding their business as they minded their flocks by night.

And that's when all heaven breaks loose. In particular the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we learn that no one can stand in the presence of the Lord. When Moses went before the Lord to receive the law even the “afterglow” of God’s presence was too much for the people to bear. And so they asked Moses to wear a veil so they wouldn’t be blinded by the reflection of God’s presence.

Indeed, in the Old Testament we learn that just seeing the glory of the Lord could be enough to kill a man.

And yet, out here in the field, the glory of the Lord shone all around these shepherds, these blue-collar workers who weren’t even making minimum wage.

LOWLY SHEPHERDS

Many of us have grown up with a rather romantic view of sheep and shepherds. We know the 23rd Psalm. The Lord is my shepherd.

But, there was another side to shepherds.

Shepherds were on the bottom rung of society.

Many people looked on shepherds as misfits that didn’t have the skills to get a better job.

They were in essence nobodies stuck in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night. No one cared about the shepherds, not even their sheep.

Yet they were the ones that God favored with God’s presence.

No one had seen the glory of God for a long time. The age of the lawgivers and the age of the prophets seemed like ancient history. The people wondered if they would ever see God’s glory again.

But, now the glory of God appears to the shepherds.

To paraphrase an old limerick, “How odd of God to chose the shepherds.”

DON'T BE AFRAID

And, as you might expect, the shepherds were not prepared for such glory. The King James Version of the Bible puts it poetically. They were “sore afraid.”

(In today’s English that means they were scared out of their wits. They were terrified.)

God favored Mary and God favored the shepherds, and their first reaction was fear. So the first message the angel had to convey was “Don’t be afraid.”

This was not the first nor will it be the last time the angels bring that message. The command to “fear not” is a common one in the Bible. God is always telling his people to fear not.

You see ... people had the wrong idea about God.

God was not out to destroy his people.

God was out to save them.

And the way God delivered the message said a lot about how God was going to accomplish His salvation.

God didn’t deliver that message of peace to Caesar or to King Herod or even to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. God didn’t do it the way the world does it, from the top down.

God did it from the bottom up.

God favored the shepherds, those on the bottom rung of society with the “good news of great joy for all the people”.

ALL PEOPLE

Did you catch that last phrase?

There is a universal element to this message after all. This message is good news of great joy for all the people. God didn’t send his Son

into the world to condemn the world. God sent his Son into the world to save the world.

But, if you are going to hear God's good news of salvation you have to hear it from the shepherds. If you're going to see the Christ child you will have to travel to a manger where his young unwed mother tends her child.

These are the ones that God favors. This is where God shows up.

GOD FAVORS YOU

And I've got some good news for you tonight. God favors Mary. God favors the shepherds. And God favors you.

God still shows up in the broken places of life. And the presence of God shows up in those places where you are broken.

For those who toil away in the middle of the night, for those whose efforts are not seen or appreciated, God has good news. Don't be afraid. The glory of the Lord surrounds you. You are not alone.

For those who struggle to pay their taxes and raise their children, God has good news. Don't be afraid. The glory of the Lord is contained in the mundane struggles of your life. You are not alone.

For those who grieve, God has good news. Don't be afraid. The glory of the Lord surrounds you. Death does not have the final word. God does. You are not alone.

The One who created the heavens and the earth has promised a new creation.

And that new creation began long ago in the town of Bethlehem in a manger.

For those who fear the terrorist and those who abuse power, God has good news. Don't be afraid. The forces of evil will not defeat the

glory of the Lord. Herod and Caesar have long since been forgotten by the world.

But, each year we still tell the story of the birth of Jesus. His story will never end.

MAY CHRIST BE BORN IN YOU

This year I've used a phrase several times in my Advent sermons, "May Christ be born in you." I much prefer that phrase to Merry Christmas, and I very much prefer that phrase to the generic "happy holidays."

Those phrases suggest unfocused merry making by people who are not sure why they are celebrating.

There really is (as the saying goes) a reason for the season. The reason for the season is the proclamation of good news.

And what is this good news?

The good news is the promise of peace on earth. This is not the peace that the world offers, merely the absence of conflict.

No, the peace promised by the angels is a power that transforms people in amazing way. This power can change enemies into friends and can light up the sky with hope.

This power is even greater than the power of death.

LIGHTS IN THE CEMETARY

There is a Lutheran tradition celebrated in some countries, which involves visiting the cemetery at Christmas.

I saw a picture of this celebration online as it occurred in Finland. A huge tree was decorated with white lights and on each grave there was a single white light.

I read that this tradition was an important part of Christmas in that country and that the traffic to see this solemn sight is quite heavy.

That impressive scene reminded me of the words to a favorite Christmas hymn, Good Christian Men Rejoice.

The last line goes,

“Good Christian men rejoice with heart and soul and voice.
Now ye need not fear the grave.
Peace! Peace! Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all, to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!”

It is my wish that the joy of Christmas will transform the broken places of your life this year with the sight of divine light.

May Christ be born in you.

Amen.