

“The Lord Is with You”

In the name of him for whom nothing is impossible, dear friends in Christ: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you”. So spoke the angel Gabriel to a very startled and confused young woman named Mary who lived in the remote Galilean village of Nazareth a little more than two thousand years ago. It was quite an auspicious greeting; and as you know, one that forever changed her life – changed it, at least, from her point of view. Her wildest dreams for the future could not have included the things that were in store for her; but they were part of the Lord’s plan for Mary from before the foundation of the world. She just didn’t know it yet.

But if you can, try to put yourself in her sandals. Imagine that you are a young woman, say around fifteen years old. You come from a family of poor Jewish peasants who struggle day to day to get by; but with everyone pulling together and working hard, you manage. You live in a small home consisting of perhaps of three rooms. The first, to one side of the entry is for the livestock – maybe a few milk goats and a couple sheep; the other two rooms are on the other side of the entry. Of them the first is a communal area that serves as kitchen, living room, and dining room; and the second – in back – is the bedroom that you share with your parents and all your brothers and sisters. Today I guess we’d call it an extremely cozy arrangement. Back then it was the way 90% of people lived.

Anyway, as a young lady on the cusp of adulthood, you have lots of work to do. This includes at least twice daily fetching water at the local well so that there will be enough for the whole household; daily grinding flour, baking bread and assisting with the other cooking; milking the goats and making a yogurt-like cheese; spinning yarn, weaving fabric, and making blankets and clothes; maintaining the family’s clothes by washing and sewing repairs; helping to care for your younger siblings; and any of a number of other domestic chores that need to be done. To all this there is seasonal work as well like gardening, sheep shearing, helping with the barley, wheat, grape, and various fruit harvests, and then doing all the work necessary to preserve that which is harvested. The point is that you’re a very busy young woman – and you’re striving to master all of these homemaking skills so that you can put them to good use for your own family, because you’re engaged to be married.

The man to whom you are betrothed is named Joseph. For a number of years he’s been apprenticed as a carpenter, and now he’s come to the stage at which he’s ready to go into business for himself. And though he is also a poor Jewish peasant, he comes from a once distinguished family. He’s a direct descendant of King David who ruled over the nation of Israel and brought it to the height of its earthly glory, which, at this point in history, was one thousand years earlier. A lot of things happen in 1000 years. Unfortunately very few of them were good for the house of David. After the reigns of David and his son Solomon, the nation of Israel fell into steady decline. At first the kingdom was divided, and then there were waves of foreign invaders that conquered the land. First the Babylonians, then the Persians, Greeks, and now finally the Romans were the masters; each in succession setting up their own rulers over God’s people. So it was that by the time Joseph came around it had been nearly six hundred years since a descendant of David sat on the throne. Though the name of David was still held in high regard among the Jews, his line was powerless and his people were dishonored and oppressed.

Galilee in these days was composed of a wide mix of peoples. Over the years many of the conquerors had imported large numbers of colonists to live in the land. The result was that the culture was predominately Greek, pagan, and progressive. The laws, of course, were Roman – and skewed strongly in favor of the conquerors over and against the rights of the conquered. And taxes were heavy. It wasn't easy being a Jew in Galilee. Life was very hard for them. And they were regarded by their pagan neighbors with a certain amount of amused curiosity. Their religion and way of life were thought to be something of a joke: backward, overly restrictive, unscientific; and the Jews themselves stubborn, resistant to change, and way too proud and standoffish to match their meager means and humble situation. For comparison, you might think of the way many modern people consider the Amish today.

Taken all together, then, Mary's circumstances – indeed, the circumstances of virtually every Jew in Galilee – were really the pits. By any objective standard, it would appear that they were a people utterly forsaken by the God they claimed to worship. And reinforcing that appearance was the fact that it had been centuries since the Lord had spoken to his people through one of his prophets. To be sure, the ink had dried on the scroll of Malachi, the last writing prophet, 440 years earlier. Since then, God had been silent. And, it surely would have seemed, markedly absent. He no longer appeared to be with his people or helping them in any way.

And that's what makes the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary all the more astounding. Her she is: a poor, humble, hardworking maiden from a disgraced people and a conquered race – and the angel says to her "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" Let me tell you: it sure would not have seemed that way to Mary. Up until that moment she would not have felt particularly favored or graced by the Lord's presence. Quite the contrary – and so much so that the angel's words probably seemed sarcastic to her. What do you mean "favored"? How can you say, "The Lord is with me"? It's small wonder she was confused by the angel's greeting.

But we know, and she came to discover, that she really was favored – chosen by the Lord from among all women in human history to be the mother of God's Son and the Savior of the world. And we know too that the Lord was with her – with her in a way that he has been with no other person ever before or since; for as the angel spoke that Word of God – that Word which is the imperishable Seed from above – by the power of the Holy Spirit the Son of the Most High was being conceived in her womb. The Lord was *with* her. At that very moment she was becoming the mother of God.

And let me stress something here: there are many well-intentioned Christians who hold Mary up on a higher level than the rest of us. They believe that she was a model of sinless perfection, that piety and faultless faith oozed from her every pore, and that she practically glowed with goodness and virtue all of the time. Such pious opinions miss the point entirely. They make Mary into something special in her own right. They make it seem that the Lord chose her for this high honor because there was already in her something worthy of that honor. Nothing can be further from the truth. This is made evident by the angel's first word to her that our text translates as "greetings" or in some other versions as "hail" – as if Gabriel were paying her some kind of homage. No, what he actually says to her is the Greek word "Chaire" [Caire] from which we get the English word "charity" and that we normally translate as "grace". Either way, grace or charity, the point is that it's an undeserved attention and favor from God that she is receiving. It's not Mary's goodness that's being stressed in the text; it's God's – God who enters the life of this sinful, undeserving, and downtrodden girl and through his grace alone bestows upon her the honor of bearing his Son.

It is precisely the same kind of gracious favor that the Lord once gave to David, the shepherd boy, the youngest and least likely of Jesse's eight sons – the grace God gave him that made him king over his people Israel. It's the same kind of grace through which David was promised a descendant who would rule over God's people forever. It's the same kind of grace that was given to Joseph, who by the Lord's favor was chosen to be the guardian and stepfather of Jesus, and who just happened to be born into David's line in such a way that through him the right to David's throne would be passed to the Son of Mary to whom he was engaged.

And I could go on and talk about how it was the same kind of gracious favor given to Noah, whom God chose to save from the flood; or to Abraham, whom God chose to be the father of all the faithful; or to Moses, whom God chose to lead his people from out of their slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land; or to any other of the Old or New Testament saints whom God chose to do great things for his people.

They all make wonderful examples of God's grace in action; but the most important thing to stress today is that you too have been given this same gracious favor by God. The Words that Gabriel spoke to Mary, I now say to you: Grace, O favored one, the Lord is with you!

Now, when you hear me say that, you might be tempted not to take it seriously. You might think, "He's got to be kidding. I'm no Mary or David or Joseph or anyone like that. I'm not on the same level as they are. And I'm certainly not living an enchanted life like they did." But that's my whole point: neither were they. They all struggled with sin and doubt. They all had times of depression, pain, and loss. For goodness sake, think of Mary trying to explain her pregnancy to her parents and then to Joseph. Think of her having to endure the pain of labor. Think of her being there to watch, many years later, as the Son she bore was condemned, beaten, and crucified. And yet, throughout it all, the Lord was with her – with her with his gracious favor.

And the same is true of you. In fact, though what happened to Mary was unique in that she was chosen to conceive and give birth to the Son of God, something parallel takes place in each one of us. What I mean is this: having taken human flesh through his mother, Mary, Jesus Christ now takes flesh in each one of us every time we hear and receive his Word. We are, after all, the members of his body. We were made so in Holy Baptism, when we first received God's grace, and the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed us, and we were given the gift of faith to trust in Jesus and his saving work on the cross. And as the infant Jesus grew in Mary's womb, so also this same Jesus grows in us when we continue to feed our faith by hearing his Word and by receiving his body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In this way we are all bearing Christ – the Lord is with us – and through the forgiveness of sins and new life he is working in us, he is constantly showing us his gracious favor.

And who knows what he has planned to do through you? No, he may not have appointed you to be a king like David or a deliverer like Moses. But they were nothing until the Lord chose them and gave them his grace. What they accomplished they did through the Lord who was with them. Well ... you've been chosen. You've been given God's grace. The Lord is with you. And with him, nothing is impossible – so don't rule anything out. Instead, let us all, like Mary, receive God's presence and grace in our lives and allow ourselves to be his instruments. Let's be conscious of the truth that we bear Christ with us, and let us say with Mary, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your Word". In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!