



## PREPARE THE WAY FOR LOVE

Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 1:35-56

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It is generally a nice thing to be found in someone's good favor: the teacher who writes the college recommendations; the maitre d' who controls the restaurant seating; the banker who knows our name. I remember a comedy some years ago in which the main character found himself in good favor with a mob boss. In that case, it was not such a good thing! So much of our well-being depends upon having good relationships. A special relationship brings benefits, but it also brings responsibility.

Mary is chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. After she has a moment to take in the news, she hurries to her cousin Elizabeth's house. She finds things to be just as the angel said. Her older cousin who seemed unable to have children is going to have a baby. Mary declares that God has "looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant."

To find favor with God brings blessing, but also terrifying responsibility. In the Scriptures we find this same expression used with other great figures: Joseph finds favor with Pharaoh and saves the people from famine; Moses finds favor with God and delivers the people from bondage in Egypt; Hannah finds favor with God and becomes the mother of Samuel who anoints David to be king; Ruth finds favor with Boaz and becomes the ancestor of Jesus; Queen Esther finds favor with the Persian king and saves the Jews in exile; Mary finds favor with God and becomes the mother of our Lord.

The Psalms speak of how God looks upon the people with favor. God's favor brings people abundant life; God's favor brings down the proud and lifts up the lowly; God's favor rearranges human affairs so that the downtrodden of the earth find justice and the abusively powerful and selfishly rich find nothing. The prophet Isaiah says that God's servant will "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Isaiah 61:2). This means that God is acting through the servant to bring freedom and justice to the oppressed. We know this servant to be Jesus.

Mary's *Magnificat*, her song of praise, speaks of the God who remembers the poor and brings justice to the earth. Her song is what keeps Christmas from drowning in sentimentality. Mary's hymn of praise awakens us to the truth that what is at stake in the birth of Jesus is the coming of God's favor to the earth. God's favor is simply this: God embraces the world with unconditional love. Divine love is incarnate in Jesus Christ.

In 1919 the theological world exploded with the publication of Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans*. In his study of Romans, Barth clearly saw God's "No" to the world of sin and death in order that God might say "Yes" to the world in Jesus Christ. God's "Yes" takes the form of unconditional love. It is not a sentimental feeling; it is not a love that seeks its own fulfillment. It is the love we see in Jesus who welcomes the stranger, forgives the sinner, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and makes room for the outcast. It is the love that pours itself out for the other. Love is not only a noun; before it is anything else, love is an active verb. This love finds perfect expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In Jesus we experience God's favor. We experience the embrace of God's love. Such love brings blessing, but it also brings frightening responsibility. In the evangelical tradition, we talk about "being saved" from sin and given new life in Christ. God's favor brings salvation. Being saved is not an end in itself; it is not the goal of our lives. We complete our understanding of what it means to be saved by knowing that we are not only saved *from* sin, but we are also saved *for* a holy purpose. The goal of our lives is to glorify God by serving God in the world.

Salvation is not about sitting back and enjoying a privileged or favored status with God; salvation means that the Lord's favor puts into motion a plan for our lives that aligns us with God's purposes. It means that we begin to embrace the world with this same holy love. In terms of our relationships with one another, divine love translates into the pursuit of justice and peace.

Like Mary and the first disciples, we discover that responding to the gospel means living as a witness to this movement of God to bring abundant life to the world. Why should we be surprised when bearing witness to God's love invites rejection and provokes resistance? Look at what happened to Jesus. Look what happened to the disciples. Yet, did any group of people ever live in such hope, know more joy, or share greater love? To find favor with God is an awesome thing in the original sense of that word. It is an experience filled with "holy wonder" or "terrifying mystery" because the Lord is at work in us.

Even Christians can distort the message of Jesus and make it into something small, mean spirited, and unlovely. No matter how things may appear, Mary declares that God's magnanimous love will prevail. Until our own understanding of love and the ways we practice love embody more and more the love of Jesus, we, too, fall short of God's embrace. We are tempted to limit our love to our families, friends, and those who share our ideas and values. It is hard enough to love these folks! Who among us has the time, energy, or even desire to love those who disagree with us, annoy us, or hurt us? Yet, Jesus commanded us to love our enemies. We distribute love with an eyedropper, but God uses a fire hose. We tend to love those who give us something in return, but Jesus loved even those who took everything from him.

When we know God's favor, then we have an *awesome* responsibility to share love, practice kindness, and work for justice. If we can provide spiritual support to those who are troubled, then this is our calling. If we can provide vocational counseling and jobs to those without work, then this is our calling. If we can give so that those who have nothing can live, then this is our calling. If we can work to change unfair social practices, then this is our calling. We are called to align ourselves with what God is doing – to lift up the lowly even as the proud are brought down by their selfish schemes. As witnesses to Jesus, we understand that salvation is not only about leading people to Jesus, it is also about helping them discover a transformed life in Jesus.

When I began my ministry in Columbia, an elder in the congregation came to me to ask how she could help the church. We were just beginning a new confirmation class so I asked her if she would get to know the youth and be a mentor to them as they began the class. One by one she took these ninth graders out to lunch, got to know them, wrote them notes, and attended their extracurricular activities. Little did I know that she has been doing this for years with other youth and young adults in the church. God had given her the gift of encouragement. She was not only sharing the love of Jesus, but she was also helping them discover how to live a transformed life

in Jesus. It was only later I learned her backstory. When she was a young wife and mother, her husband was driving the car when there was a bad accident. She was injured. When she awoke in the hospital, she learned that her young baby had been killed in the accident. She said, "I had to decide that day if I could go on living. I remembered the words of the Psalm, 'I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.' I knew that with God's help I could go on living." The experience of God's favor led her to share the transforming power of God's love with others.

God's favor brings us blessing and salvation; God's favor also brings awesome responsibility. In Jesus, God embraces the world in holy love. This love changes us; it awakens us to the way God moves the earth to justice by bringing down the proud and lifting up the humble. Like Mary, we, too, are God's servants "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Tony Snow served as Press Secretary to President Bush. Tony Snow died in 2008 after a long battle with cancer. He was a devout Christian. Before his death he shared his faith and his reflections on life. I would like to share some of his words with you now because his words show that what we believe about God matters. Snow writes:

We don't know how our lives will end, but we get to choose how to use the interval between now and the moment we meet our Creator face-to-face.... We want lives of simple, predictable ease, - smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see, - but God likes to go off-road. God provokes us with twists and turns. God places us in predicaments that seem to defy our endurance and comprehension - and yet don't. By God's love and grace, we persevere. The challenges that make our hearts leap and stomachs churn invariably strengthen our faith and grant measures of wisdom and joy we would not experience otherwise. Christianity is not something doughy, passive, pious, and soft. The life of belief teems with thrills, boldness, danger, shocks, reversals, triumphs, and epiphanies.

Finally, we can let love change everything. We get repeated chances to learn that life is not about us, that we acquired purpose and satisfaction by sharing in God's love for others. Will we be bold enough to love, daring enough to serve, humble enough to submit, and strong enough to acknowledge our limitations? Can we surrender our concern about things that don't matter so that we might devote our remaining days to things that do? We may not know how our lives will end, but we have felt the ineluctable touch of God. Our lives are held in the same safe and impregnable place, in the hollow of God's hand.

We too are held in the hollow of God's hand. God has looked upon us with favor. Such divine favor brings us the terrifying responsibility to love.