

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Highly Favored Part 1

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Scripture:

Luke 1: 26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Transcript:

So Holy Spirit, as we look at your word for a few minutes here, ask that you would help us to hear what you have to say and make us brave. In your name Jesus. Amen.

Well this summer, I read a very long book on the history of fear over the last 3000 years. Yes. I am that much of a nerd that is what I call fun. And one of the points it makes is that ever since 9/11, Americans have lived in a heightened sense of fear. First, there was 9/11 and terrorism. Then there was the worst economic collapse since the depression and now a pandemic and political division and some of those divisions are over how afraid we should be of the pandemic and how we should respond. Liberals are afraid of conservatives and vice versa. A lot of fear.

So for the next couple of weeks, we are doing a sermon series called "Fear Not" on some of the ways that Christmas frees us from fear because everyone has some kind of fear. Everyone. And today, as we've said, is worship through music where the sermon is going to be really short and most of the service will be us worshipping through music. We're doing it, as Annie said, two different weeks. This week in a modern/new hope style. Next week, sanctuary style of worship because we want everyone to experience the amazing diversity of styles that God has brought here.

And so accordingly, this sermonette will be in two parts. Half today and half next Sunday. The most frequent statement in the Christmas narrative in Bible is fear not. Just as we read in this chapter, the angel shows up and tells Mary she's going to be the mother of Jesus and the angel says, do not be afraid.

I love it in the Bible when an angel shows up and says don't be afraid and then goes on to say something terrifying which is exactly what happens here. Right? According to this culture, Mary would've probably been 14, 15 years old at the time she's engaged to Joseph. An angel says you're going to be the mother of the savior of the world even though you're not yet married, even though you're a virgin. It's going to be a miraculous pregnancy. Isn't this great Mary? It's going to go so great. Right? Aren't you excited? Nobody's going to believe it which in that culture would at best mean she would've been a social outcast for life and at worse executed for being unmarried and pregnant and she could have said no. She had agency but she said may it be to me as the Lord commands,

which is why I think one of the bravest people in the whole Bible is a teenage girl named Mary because courage is not the absence of fear.

We're going to feel fear. Courage is when we act in faith in spite of fear and that's what Mary does. And how many of us are like Mary and say to God if you say so God, I'll do it? Because one of the things we're afraid of is to do what God says to do. That's one of our fears. Right? I mean I'm afraid to ask what God's will is for my life because then he might make me go be a missionary in New Jersey. No. Don't want to do that.

I recently heard a pastor say that when he began to feel like God was telling him to be a pastor and he finally told his wife she said well, one of us has made a mistake because she didn't want to be married to a pastor. We are afraid to do God's will, sometimes with good reason, because if we give Jesus control, he will turn our lives upside down. And yet paradoxically, one of the best ways to fear not is to do what God commands us to do even when it's scary. It's a paradox.

One of the churchy phrases you hear sometimes people say is the safest place to be is in the center of God's will. Oh ick. Like read the Bible. The prophets were beaten and jailed. God told Isaiah to preach naked. That's not safe. The Bible says that the heroes of their faith were put to death by stoning. They were sawed in two. They were killed by the sword. But other than that, totally safe.

God's will is the most exciting place to be, the most rewarding place to be. Every mountaintop experience I have had has been because I follow Jesus outside of my comfort zone but it is not safe. And yet paradoxically, when we are doing what God commands, it helps us to not fear.

Now obviously, we shouldn't take stupid risks. God gave us a brain. He expects us to use it. The early Christians were very bold about their faith even though it meant being killed for it but they also took precautions. They met in secret. They hid. They tried not to get caught. They didn't fear but they took wise precautions. God's will leads to a richer, deeper life and paradoxically, leads to less fear even when it puts us in more danger and we see that with Mary.

See, God is trying to give Mary a gift. She gets a lead role in God's salvation plan. Jesus is God himself coming in human form. She gets to hold God himself in her arms. How many people got to do that? And she would've missed out on all of that if she had said no. The angel says to her greetings. You who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Highly favored. Mary was greatly troubled, not a little troubled, double troubled. But the angel said to her do not be afraid Mary. You have found favor, there's that word again, with God.

Notice the highly favored becomes the greatly troubled because here's what highly favored looks like. Inconvenience, interruption, insecurity. And notice, fear and favor are in the same sentence. Fear and favor of God are related to each other. When God give you a gift, it often troubles you before it blesses you because to fully experience God's favor, we have to step outside our comfort zone and do what is scary or uncomfortable.

So when you are greatly troubled, be aware that you might be about to be highly favored. God says go make friends with that person who nobody seems to like and we say but God, then people won't like me. God says give sacrificially and we say but God, then I might not have enough money. I'm afraid. God says take this job I'm calling you to and we say God, but that job's not as prestigious or makes as much money. And yet in all of those things, there's a gift. The favor of God when we do them. Giving helps us see God provides, which alleviates our fears of money. The less prestigious job may give us more joy and that's why Mary says yes.

So how do we do that? How do we choose favor over fear the way Mary does? How do we choose favor over fear? How do we move in faith, not fear? Two things. First, we don't obey God to get his favor. We obey God because we have already received his favor. It's really important to note that the angel tells Mary that she is highly favored before he tells her what God is asking her to do. God's favor always proceeds God's call.

We spend so much time fighting for favor. Right? Working really hard to achieve in school or sports or work so that then people will favor us, like us, respect us. That's fighting for favor. You do not have to fight for God's favor. You already have it. It's like when the credit card companies send me notices to try to get me to sign up for their card. Sometimes they'll say Scott Dudley, you've been pre-approved. Oh how nice. My own mother didn't pre-approve me but the credit card company does and God does too. You have been pre-approved.

He came himself, in the person of Jesus to die on the cross to pay the price for your sins to show you how much he loves you. The favor of God is on you. He will never leave you or abandon you. God's favor is on you. God will use every horrible thing in our lives for ultimate good. God's favor is on you and when you know that God's favor is on you, you will take all kinds of risks to do whatever he says to do because you know even if it's scary, even if it's hard, even if it's uncomfortable, you will find the favor of God in the middle of it. Back in 2005, there was a story in the news about a woman named Ashley Smith who was a single mom, struggling to get by and one day, she was ambushed outside of her apartment by a man who had just killed four people and was trying to hide from the police and he forced her into her apartment where he held her for seven hours. But Ashley found the favor of God empowering her to fear not.

So she told this man that her husband had died and if anything happened to her, her daughter would not have just a dad but wouldn't have a mom either. She then pulled out her Bible and began reading to this guy and Ashley told him that he needed hope and he said to her look at me. I'm a dead man. I have no hope and she said you are not dead and you are here for a reason and you need to get caught for this. You need to go to prison for this and you need to preach the word of God to the prisoners there. And this man then said to Ashley, that she was an angel sent from God and that God must have led him right to her and eventually, after seven hours, he finally allowed her to leave.

She called the police and they arrested him. Well that was a turning point in Ashley's life because see, she was in the process of trying to get free from a drug addiction and she'd lost her job. Her daughter had to go live with relatives and Ashley was trying to turn all of that around and during these seven hours, this man had tried repeatedly to get her to use meth and that's what she was trying to get free from. And she felt like God, in that moment, was asking her have you had enough? Are you ready to change? And she said in that moment, she finally began to get free of the addiction. And after this whole ordeal and months later, eventually, she was able to get off the drugs, eventually got a job, got her daughter back over the next couple of months and then she did something interesting. She started to reach out to the families of the victims that this guy had killed. To heal them, to love them, to show them who Jesus was. And Ashley said in retrospect, when he offered me that meth, I knew that whether I had five seconds to live or 50 years to live, because he might have killed her for saying no, she said in that moment, I had never felt so free. Facing

a killer, she had never felt so free and had compassion for this guy because her life was a mess too. She said God reached down into the hell that it was my life and he didn't give up on me and he turned it all around and she said I didn't do anything spectacular. I just began to obey God. I just, like Mary, did what God said to do and he changed my entire life. While facing a killer, she experienced the favor of God and the favor empowered her to fear not and be bold and confront a killer in the name of Jesus and eventually made her an agent of healing to the families of the victims that he had killed.

When we do what God says to do, it may be scary. It may be hard or maybe it's just uncomfortable. Americans are really afraid of being uncomfortable. But there is a gift in it and we find the strength to do that, do what God says, not by trying to earn God's favor but by experiencing the fact that we already have God's favor, which brings me to my second point and this is a really important point. This is like one of the best sermon points I have ever made ever and I'm not going to tell you. You're just going to have to come back next week for point number two.

But for this week, what is scary right now to you or maybe it's just an uncomfortable thing that God might be nudging you to do. Doesn't even have to be big. Maybe it's just a little thing. As we continue to worship through music, the songs are all about not fearing. They're not explicitly Christmas songs this year but in a way they are Christmas songs because they're all about not fearing and the reasons we have not to fear and the great thing about music is it can get into our hearts.

So as we worship through music, let the words speak to you. Be aware of the thoughts God's calling to your mind, the feelings he's giving you, and ask God to give you courage to do the things he's nudging you to do and remind you that you are highly favored, to move in faith not fear from the favor you've received in Jesus.

So Lord, as we worship, help us to experience your favor in a way that makes us brave, moving our hearts, moving our minds, the words of this music, the testimony we're going to hear. Lord, I pray that you would in all of that teach us to fear not and do your will. In Jesus name. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Luke 1:26-38

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- Given the trials Mary will have to face by accepting God's will for her to be the mother of Jesus, why does the Angel say that she is highly favored? What does that mean?
- Why do you think Mary said yes? What questions or concerns would you have had if you were in her place?
- How can you apply this text to your life this week?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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