

“Grace: Mary”

Luke 1: 26-56

This is a familiar text, one that we use this time each year. In fact, I could probably place a safe bet that we often say the lines along with the preacher when it is being read on Sunday mornings during Advent. So I know it is no surprise that I am preaching on it this Sunday, especially since it is Gabriel’s second appearance in the Gospel of Luke and it goes along with our Advent theme.

But I invite us to once again hear this wonderfully rich story, a story about a young woman and her angelic experience, a story that reminds of the grace and love of God.

Read text: Message version

I have a confession to make. I am not really comfortable with this text. As you may have noticed, I have been trying to use Gabriel’s messages from our different Advent texts as our call to worships each week but this week, his message, his very words gave me a moment’s pause. They are not like anything I have ever heard before and his greeting made me uncomfortable. I thought the reason his message made me so uncomfortable was that I am so used to hearing

“Greetings! You have found favor with God. God be with you” but that wasn’t it. My uncomfortable feeling was something more than hearing unfamiliar words. So what was it? Why was I so uncomfortable with Gabriel’s message?

As I lived with the text this week, I realized that very much like Mary, as soon as I heard Gabriel’s message, I began to wonder what was behind a greeting like that. I began to wonder what Gabriel was getting at when he shared these words with Mary and with us as the people of God.

Sure for Mary, he was going to tell her she was pregnant and it was going to be a huge surprise but what about for us as the people of God? What is Gabriel getting at or want when he shares this greeting with us in this text?

To be honest, when I sat down on Monday morning to begin sermon prep, and I read this text, I wondered if I should scrap the whole text and go with something else. I was just so uncomfortable with Gabriel’s message that it got me to thinking, if I’m so uncomfortable with his message, what will be the congregation’s reaction to it? Will his words push us too much out of our comfort zones? Will they think that I have lost my mind? Will they think to themselves, “Why is she using this particular version of the text and not the normal reading?”

I wondered what your reaction would be today when you heard Gabriel’s message, a message that tells you that you are beautiful with God’s beauty, beautiful inside and out.

And it was in that moment, I realized that I had found my sermon for today. My sermon found me, shifting uncomfortably in my seat, reacting very much the same way as Mary did when she first heard these words. Sure, Gabriel's message surprised her. Sure, his words made her uncomfortable. But what struck me was that she wondered what was really behind his greeting. What struck me was that his words surprised her. They were not like anything that she had ever heard before and they were certainly not words that she expected to come from one of God's messengers.

Let's be honest, I'm not sure how I would react if an angel came to me and gave me this greeting. It's not every day we encounter angels speaking to us. It is not every day that we hear that we are beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out. It's not every day we have such amazing experiences.

And even if we did, we know that it is not just everyone who hears words like the ones Gabriel shared with Mary. And we know that even if we did say things like this, it is not that we can go up to just anybody and say, "You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out" without that person thinking we are crazy or coming off as inappropriate, like we don't know the correct behavior for certain social situations.

In fact, the more I thought about it this week, I'm not sure that we can say these words, this greeting of Gabriel's without people thinking we are crazy,

without people thinking we are inappropriate, without thinking we don't know the correct behavior for social situations.

And it made me sad. It made my heart hurt that we are not able to do just that. That we aren't able and that we don't just walk up to someone and say, You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful with God's beauty inside and out and more importantly say, God is with you and that you have found favor with God.

Why don't we do that? What would happen if we as people of faith really did start walking up to people, people that we knew, people that we didn't know, people that have heard they are beautiful every day of their lives, and people who have never heard that they are beautiful, what would happen if we as people of faith really did start walking up to people and say, "You are beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out and God is with you always? What would happen? What would happen if we did just that?

As I pondered the possibilities, I realized something in that moment. That's is exactly what we are called to as the heart and hands of God here on earth. We are called to share God's beauty, to share God's love, to share God's grace with all that we meet. And I realized that the reason why we are so uncomfortable with Gabriel's greeting and the reason we don't just say these words to all that we meet is because this world has told us that normal people don't just go around saying

stuff like that. This world has also told us that if someone says something nice to us than they must have an some alternative motive. This world has told us that people just don't go around saying nice things about other people without expecting something in return, that people don't just go around telling others that they are beautiful without expecting some compliment in return. The world has told us to be suspicious when someone is being nice to us because they want something from us. This world has told us that normal people just don't go around telling others that they are valued, that they are loved, that they are wrapped in God's goodness and grace.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized something great, something freeing, something life giving and life transforming. As the people of God, we are not normal. We are not normal at least according to this world's notion of normal. In fact, if asked, some would even say that as people of faith, we were foolish and maybe just a little crazy.

That's nothing new. This world has been saying that for years. And I guess if you really look at it, maybe we are just a little crazy because we do profess belief in a Savior who came as a baby, weak and vulnerable, born in a stable. We profess belief in a Savior who died at the hands of the powers that be and to make matters worse, died a death of a criminal. He died on a cross. We profess belief in a Savior who overcame the grave so we might live.

I guess if you look at it, we are just a little crazy. And I'm okay with that. I'm okay with that because I know what God has done for me. I'm okay with that because I know the power of God's love and God's grace. I know the blessings that fill my life that this world can never take away.

I'm okay with this world thinking I'm a little crazy because I know that God loved me so much that God sent God's only Son for me and for all of God's children so that we might live, so that we might be restored, so that we might be made whole.

I'm okay with this world thinking that I'm a little crazy because I believe that I have found favor with God because I know that I am claimed and named as God's very own.

I'm okay with the world thinking I'm a little crazy because I also know something that this world does not know. I know God's grace. I know God's love. And that brings me joy! That brings me peace. That brings me hope. That brings me happiness that this world does not understand.

How can we not feel these things when we know how precious we are in God's sight? How can we not feel joy when we hear the great news that God has come and will come again to make us whole? How can we not feel joy when we hear the great news that we are claimed and named as God's own?

How can we not keep our hearts from singing when we know how much God has done for us, how much God has given us, how much God loves us, how much of God's life changing grace fills our lives, no guilt, no strings attached and no obligation? God simply showers us with grace, amazing grace because we are precious in God's sight.

That's why Mary sings! She discovers that there is nothing behind Gabriel's greeting except God's love and God's grace. There is nothing behind Gabriel's greeting except the joy of knowing that she has found favor with God simply because she is named and claimed as one of God's own. There is nothing behind Gabriel's greeting except an invitation to experience true joy.

Gabriel's greeting is simply the very heart, the very essence of the Gospel message that we know is true. We are beautiful. We are beautiful with God's beauty. We are beautiful inside and out and God is with us always. Our hearts should leap for joy when we hear these words. These words are not meant to make us uncomfortable. These words are meant to set us free, free to experience God's grace, free to experience God's love. These words are shared with us as the people of God so that we will move from who we think we are to what God has called us to be, to who God sees us as, to who God created us to be.

We are beautiful. We are beautiful with God's beauty. We are beautiful inside and out because we are created in the image of God and loved more than we can ever imagine. We are beautiful because we are precious in God's sight.

That's it. There really is not anything behind Gabriel's message except the Gospel message that he was called to share as one of God's messengers. There is really not anything behind Gabriel's message except the good news that we are called to share as the messengers of God here on earth. There is really nothing behind this message except the grace and love of God, no strings attached, with no guilt, and with no obligation.

We are beautiful. We are beautiful inside and out with God's beauty. We are beautiful because we are created in the image of God, loved more than we could ever imagine, and precious in God's sight.

These are powerful words. These are life changing words. Just ask Archbishop Tutu. He did an interview with NPR a few months ago and they asked him about his experience in ministry in South Africa during apartheid and I haven't been able to get a part of the interview out of my mind all week. I want to share with you what he said, simply because I cannot do justice to his words and because they are so powerful:

The interviewer asked: Can you recall one of those early discoveries of as the Bible as dynamite? Some teaching that you suddenly saw as so relevant

And Archbishop Tutu responded: Well, it's actually right the very first thing. I mean, when you discover that apartheid sought to mislead people into believing that what gave value to human beings was a biological irrelevance, really, skin color or ethnicity, and you saw how the scriptures say it is because we are created in the image of God, that each one of us is a God-carrier. That no matter what our physical circumstances may be, no matter how awful, no matter how deprived you could be, it doesn't take away from you this intrinsic worth. One saw just how significant it was.

Although I was a bishop, I was working now for the Southern Council of Churches and had a small parish in Soweto. Most of my parishioners were domestic workers, not people who were very well educated. But I would say to them, "You know, mama, when they ask, 'Who are you?'"— you see, the white employer most frequently didn't use the person's name. They said the person's name was too difficult. And so most Africans, women would be called "Annie" and most black men really, you were "boy." And I would say to them, "When they ask, 'Who are you?' you say, 'Me? I'm a God-carrier. I'm God's partner. I'm created in the image of God.'" And you could see those dear old ladies as they walked out of church on that occasion as if they were on cloud nine. You know, they walked with their backs slightly straighter. And, yeah, it was amazing.

I'm a God-carrier. I'm created in the image of God. That is the relationship that should define us. That is the relationship that should challenge us to anticipate what is promised. That is the relationship that should bring us joy.

We are God-carriers. We are beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out because we all have within us a tiny point, a glimmer of light, an expression of love and grace that is always in contact with God.

Who are you? I'm a God-carrier and so are you. We are beautiful with God's beauty. We are precious in God's sight.

That's the good news that was shared with Mary that day and that is the same good news that is share with us today. We have found favor with God because we are claimed and named as one of God's own.

We carry within our souls, within ourselves a deep connection with God, a deep connection with God's love, a deep connection with God's grace. We are God-carriers, created in the image of God, precious in his sight.

The wonderful news that is found in our text today is that Mary literally becomes a God-carrier, becoming pregnant and carrying a child that would become God in the flesh now appearing for the people of God back then and now. And the that invitation is being offered to us today. Sure, we might not walk out of here literally pregnant, wouldn't that be a story.

No we may not being offered the exact same invitation as Mary but we are being offered an invitation to give birth in a sense to the notion that God in flesh is still appearing in our world and in our lives through our very own actions and words. We are being given a chance to embrace our roles as God carriers for this world.

We are being given a chance to realize that every time we make a child smile, that every time we show compassion, that every time we arrange a bouquet of flowers, every time we offer care, every time we prevent pollution, every time we recognize the beauty of God in ourselves and in others by working for peace and justice, we connect more deeply to that glimmer of light, to that guiding point, to that point of God grace and God's love within ourselves. And soon, we will come to the point when we will no longer be able to see ourselves for who we

think we are. We will only be able to see ourselves and see this world how God sees us, how God sees the world. And then truly there will be peace on earth.

We are God carriers. We carry within ourselves the beauty of God's grace. We carry around within us the hope and the vision of God's kingdom. We carry around within ourselves the opportunity to recognize the beauty of God in others, to see others as God sees them, to see this world as God sees this world, a world that is free, a world that is at peace, a world that is full of joy and love.

We carry around with us an invitation to share God's grace and God's love. We carry around an invitation tell everyone we met that they are beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out. And that they have found favor with God.

May we as God's messengers here on earth always say this life changing, this life forming, this life giving news with everyone that we met and spread the joy of the good news with all of God's creation. Amen.