

Think about five people in your life with whom you have a relationship. Could be anyone; family, co-workers, church people, neighborhood, friends. What would you say is the basis of those relationships? What is their foundation? What's the substance that brings the two of you together? It may be love, like the love of a spouse or child. It may be responsibility or obligation, like to a boss. It could be fear. Maybe you grew up with people in your lives that you worked to keep happy because you were afraid of them. Or maybe it's guilt, like guilt with a mother-in-law.

Now what about your relationship with God? What is it based on? What is the thing that brings you together? The answer could be the same as the answers we give for our other relationships: love, fear, obligation and guilt. So what is it with God?

It's an important question because, as we saw last week, this child to be born shall be called Immanuel, God with us, and none of you screamed out in terror. But is that really a good thing? If you read the Old Testament, God shows himself as a pillar of fire, shekinah glory, distant, behind a veil, constantly judging, never pleased, terrifying, kills people who touch the ark of the covenant, and the giver of a standard that simply could not be met. Some of you grew up being told God was constantly disappointed in you or mad at you and you still see him in that same way today. You have been left constantly wondering if he can be trusted, if he is safe, if he is really for you and loves you, or if he's looking for any opportunity to reject you. But is that who he is? Is that how we relate to him?

This morning we continue in our series called Behold! We are looking at the different passages that tell about the birth of Jesus and declare who he is and what he's come to do. And, this morning, the Christmas story has a resounding answer to this question about how we relate to God. It is going to be announced from the angel Gabriel to a young Jewish girl, and through her we will see, we will behold, the substance of our relationship with this God who comes to be with us.

He'll begin by saying **Immanuel comes to us on the basis of God's favor**. All of his attributes are present, but Christmas magnifies his grace.

[Luke 1:26-30] ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

An angel comes to a young and unimpressive woman named Mary, who resides in an unimpressive backwater town called Nazareth, who's engaged to an unimpressive man named Joseph. The only thing interesting about him is that he's from the line of David. Yet the angel tells her God's favor is upon her. The words translated favor here are all based on the Greek word *charis*, which most often gets translated as grace. We often define grace as unmerited favor, and that is certainly true of Mary. The angel is announcing that Mary is having bestowed upon her the favor of God, not because of anything she's done to deserve it, but because of the kindness of God.

A few years back I was visiting with my older brother and my mom and seemingly out of nowhere my brother started telling us that I was clearly the favorite. From his observation as the oldest, he saw me as the recipient of special attention by my parents; not because of anything I had done but simply because they had chosen to out of the kindness of their own hearts (though clearly, after 40 years, he still didn't take kindly to it!)

God does the same thing with us. Mary is the recipient of special favor. She will be the mother of this child the angel is talking about, not because she's special, but out of his own kind initiative. That same favor is given to us. The good news is that he doesn't play favorites. We're all favored! The word "O favored one" is found only one other time in the New Testament.

[Ephesians 1:3-6] ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed (favored) us in the Beloved.

We are all favored ones. Each of us who have trusted in Christ has been a recipient of God's grace. It is unmerited. We've done nothing to deserve it. It's given out of God's kindness to us. If God related to us on the basis of our own merit, what we bring, we'd be in trouble, because we have nothing good to offer. That's why the glory of Christmas is that God comes to us on the basis of his favor. You can't do anything to earn it, and if you can't do anything to earn it, you can't do anything to lose it. And if you think you are so unworthy that there's simply no way God would take an interest in you, Christmas says otherwise, because he came to be with us all. **God doesn't give us grace because we're something. But, because he gives us grace, we're something.** It means God loves us and wants to be Immanuel, God with us, and that relationship is made possible because of what he brings into it, namely his grace/favor.

So how does Mary respond? We're told she was greatly troubled and tried to discern what was happening. She heard that God was with her and that she was an object of his grace. Mary is likely asking the question "What does God want with me?" It's like when you get a call on your cell phone from someone you don't normally hear from and wonder why on earth they are calling you, even to the point of worry.

It's not an unreasonable response by Mary. Sometimes God's favor, his grace, doesn't show up how we might expect, or want, it to. For OT Joseph, God's grace showed up in getting thrown down a well and sold into slavery by his brothers, which led to his rise in Egypt and ability to care for the line of Abraham. For me, God's grace came in the form of failure that ultimately led to several idols in my life being shattered. For you, it may come in the form of illness, trial, struggle that may help you let go of something, change direction, heal relationships, or give you a purpose in your life that you wouldn't have had otherwise. Mary wants to know what it means for her and in the midst of that wonder is fear. The angel is clear: Mary, do not fear, you have found favor with God. **Christmas is reassurance that when you encounter God on the basis of his grace, you have nothing to fear.** It doesn't mean our lives all of a sudden become easy and carefree, but it does mean God is for you and he's come to be with you.

Immanuel comes to us as the person of God's favor. God's favor is more than a sentiment or gesture given to us. It comes to us in the person of Jesus.

[Luke 1:31-33] ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The favor Mary receives is the birth of a son. This is no ordinary child, though. I have seen impressive resumes in my life, but this one tops them all. It could take us weeks and weeks of study to unpack all of what the angel says about this child, but I want you to see how God comes to us through his identity, character, and mission.

His name will be Jesus: As we saw last week, Jesus means Yahweh is salvation, the Lord saves. This child's ministry will be salvation.

He will be great. "Great" is a weak word in English. We could say it about milk being on sale. So any time we see God's Word talk about God using the word "great", substitute the original Greek: Mega. Jesus is mega! He will show his greatness throughout his life, his greatness upon the cross, and his greatness when he walks out of a tomb three days later. His greatness is hope for us because the power that defeated sin and death has been given to us.

He will be called Son of the Most High: In Jewish thought, a son was a carbon copy of his father. The phrase "Son of" means that person possesses his father's qualities. In the Old Testament, El Elyon is translated God Most High. Put all that together and it becomes another proclamation that this child to be born is God.

He will sit on the throne of his father David, reign over the house of Jacob (Israel), and his kingdom will have no end: This child is the long-awaited Messiah, the king promised to David in 2 Samuel 7 who will save and redeem Israel and bless all of mankind. And because he rules forever, his salvation will be forever.

If we truly behold what the angel has said, imagine the difference it would make in our lives. The angel says our God is a **promise keeper**. He kept his promises in sending Jesus and will keep his promises to finish his work of salvation. That means you can trust him. The angel says he is a **king**, but not one who rules with an iron fist. The king he is talking about is benevolent, loving, caring, and a servant. It means you can follow and serve him. And the angel says he is **God**, the eternal, transcendent God who chooses to take on flesh to save us. That means you can worship him. The message of the angel is that, in Jesus, the favor of God is given to fulfill the promise of God to make us the people of God. He is the hope of us all.

Immanuel comes to us with the possibilities of God's favor. God's pouring out of his favor alters our eternity, but it is also has the power to change our present.

[Luke 1:34-37] ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most

High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Mary's question is not a sign of weak faith but of confusion. She is thinking in biological terms and has not known a man sexually. She doesn't understand how this can happen. The angel answers that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her to conceive this child. The Creator God who brought life out of nothing and created humans from the dust is also able to create human life in her womb. Jesus' conception could come about in no other way. The sexual union of a man and woman would not be sufficient to incarnate the eternal Son of God, nor would it be sufficient to create a holy being. This was a creative, active, miraculous work of God accomplished by his Spirit. And in case Mary is still questioning, the angel tells her that her old and barren relative Elizabeth (whom we'll see next week) is now pregnant with God's help (though biologically). Nothing will be impossible for God.

Grace is limitless, but if we don't understand and acknowledge the favor God extends to us, we'll be inclined to limit him. Christmas is a reminder that he can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. By his favor, God moves in the life of Mary, and she's changed forever. He can do the same for us.

What a wonderful holiday reminder as we all consider taking courageous next steps. God has the power to accomplish anything he wants. It doesn't mean he will accomplish anything we ask, but he will accomplish everything according to his perfect plan. If your courageous step is in that plan, he will see it through. If you are struggling and asking the same question as Mary, "how can this be?" let me remind you of the message of the angel. Do not fear. You have found favor with God, and he is with you always.

When we behold God's favor, the answer is "yes". When we truly grasp the grace of God, he will become irresistible. It happened for Mary, and it can happen for us.

[Luke 1:38] ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Because Mary beheld God's favor, Mary said yes. It meant a risk to her marriage to Joseph, public and familial shame, and the big question mark of what it meant to be the mother of the Messiah. She likely didn't anticipate having to see her son rejected, persecuted, and unjustly crucified. But here's what she's learned: God is with me because of his favor. He is sending his Son to usher in that favor for eternity. And if the favor of God is in my life, he will accomplish all he wills. If that's true, the answer is yes.

Christmas reminds us that our gracious God came to be with us and extends his favor to us to make that happen. He is the Savior of the world, he is our Risen King, he is the lover of our souls who went first so we could be together. How will you respond? There is no better choice than saying yes, not just once when you trust in him for salvation, but each day as you live your life for him. This week, say yes to God with a newfound peace because you have beheld his favor,

and you know he accepts you, is for you, and is with you. And then keep going. It will be difficult at times, but it will be full of grace, full of his presence, and full of possibilities.

We are going to close this morning with an expression of those who have recognized and responded to God's favor. This morning we are going to baptize eight members of our faith family. They have recognized that God moved first, that he has extended his grace to them through the person of Jesus and for the sake of their salvation and eternity with him, and that his grace is powerful enough to raise Christ from the dead and them from death to life. Baptism is a public expression of that internal change. It is a declaration that they have beheld the glory of God and received God's gracious salvation by placing their faith in Jesus.