

Do you know that feeling when you walk into class and someone else's stuff is on your desk?

I would've asked if you knew the feeling when you walk into church and someone was sitting in your pew, but I thought that might touch a nerve ... figure there might be some longing there.

But you know that feeling when someone else's stuff is in your place? Like, everyone knows it is your seat, why? Who would do that? What kind of person would do that?

Some time ago, I stumbled on a story about a college student named Thomas, and he would sit in the same seat every day in his Management class. Every day. Same seat. Now, Thomas shared that he sat next to an international student who really struggled with English.

Thomas goes on: "This guy also has a habit of stacking every item he owns in the exact space I sit. His bag, his food, his books, and his phone are ALWAYS right on my desk space."¹

This fellow student would scramble to move all of his stuff as Thomas arrived to class, and then after moving his stuff, at this 8:00am class, would always offer a high five.

Who gives high fives at 8:00am?

One day, Thomas is running late, and stops outside the door to shoot a quick text message.

[Hold that image]

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“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

I’m usually captivated by Mary when I read this passage, and she is always integral to the reading. However, the greeting resonated with me this week, catching me and holding me like an eddy in the middle of powerful rapids.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

What sort of greeting is this? Even Mary wondered. She was perplexed. She pondered, deliberated, discerned what sort of greeting this could be.

Was this a joke? Was the angel mocking her? Was Gabriel setting her up? Was Gabriel sincere?

But the deeper question: Did she believe what was happening? She clearly seems to, but even more so:

Did she believe the words of the greeting?

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

The Greek for favored is: χαριτόω [*charitoō*]

(*ch* is that guttural sound at the back of the tongue)

It has a beautiful turn of phrase, literally meaning:

to be highly favored, to make graceful,
to honor with blessings, to endue with special honor.

There are a litany of reasons that would lead Mary to doubt the sincerity of this encounter, but perhaps, as Gabriel continued, and she realized that he WAS SERIOUS, the root cause of her perplexity was hearing this:

She is favored by God and God is with her.

The truth is this: I don't think Mary is the only one who struggles to believe that she is favored and that God is with her. And this isn't just because it is 2020. The doubts we have about our self-image and how we relate to God existed pre-covid.

But maybe the depth of the struggle and heartache of this year exacerbates our disbelief and the perplexity about how God relates to us, which only further affirms and asserts the importance of this greeting.

Maybe more than ever, we need to be reminded that the heart of the carols and prayers and scriptures and stories of Advent and Christmas is precisely this: God comes to us in love, God arrives to us in love, to tell us that we are dearly loved, so very loved.

And then we are sent out in love, to bear that love into the world, carrying love to others, sharing the life-giving and transformative power of God's love.

You are highly favored.
And God accompanies you.
Always.

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For many, this may be the most different and difficult Christmas season that we have experienced in our lives, an overflowing dumpster fire of a year that makes hearing Gabriel's greeting nearly impossible, much less believable.

And yet, the truth is the common complexity of human life can be a barrier too high or wide to hear and believe that God favors us and is with us.

A challenging cancer diagnosis or illness.

Marital tension and conflict.

Addiction that haunts and oppresses.

The fear of real intimacy and vulnerability in relationships.

Anxiety and depression that overwhelms.

Worries about and for our children.

We each have our bag of bricks we carry, the walls that tower over us, the things that attempt to separate us from the love of God; the list of human struggle is as infinite as our individual particular context.

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But when the Apostle Paul writes that nothing can separate us from the love of God, it is the very life of Jesus, beginning with humble and messy circumstances of his birth, that speak hope, light, and love into the strained fabric of our lives.

This perplexing greeting from Gabriel is the proclamation that Jesus has moved into our neighborhood, taking up residence in the messiness of our human existence.

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

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I am reminded of a story from 1930s South Africa, in which a black woman and her little boy were walking down the street. A white priest in a long cassock was walking toward them.

As he approached the mother and child, he tipped his hat as a gentleman would do in those days when passing a white lady. Years later, the little boy would recall the experience with these words:

'You could have knocked me down with a feather. ... He doffed his hat to my mother. Now that seemed a perfectly normal thing I suppose for him, but for me, it was almost mind-boggling, that a white man could doff his hat to my mother, a black woman, [who was] really a nonentity in South Africa's terms.'²

The priest doffing his hat was an act of grace that endowed a special honor unto the mother. A simple greeting unveiled the dignity of that mother and child and shifted their perception, a sacramental action that transformed the reality of the world.

That day, the hands that doffed that hat were no less than the hands of Jesus, a greeting that proclaimed: the Lord is with you.

The little boy who was walking with his mother would one day grow up to be the Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu.

The ripples of grace would travel far and wash onto thirsty shores. In one interview Bishop Tutu shared of his work in a small parish, of which most of his parishioners were domestic workers. Their white employers frequently did not call them by name, saying their names were too difficult.

Bishop Tutu goes on: "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."³

It is a perplexing and wonderfully beautiful thing to hear that you are favored by God and that God accompanies you.

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Now back to Thomas, who is late to his management class. As he sends that text, another student walks in and goes to take his seat because it is closest to the door.

But the guy who sits next to him, who always piles his stuff on Thomas' desk, stops this other student from sitting down and says, "I'm sorry. My good friend Thomas sits here."

It was in this moment that Thomas realized that this guy wasn't putting his stuff on Thomas' desk to annoy him or even out of some absent-minded negligence. He was saving that seat for Thomas every morning. This whole time he saw Thomas as his good friend.

You bet Thomas received that high five.

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A greeting from God can arrive in the most abrupt and unexpected of moments, shifting the ground under your feet.

Sometimes, we are privileged enough to be the hands that doff the hat, proclaiming to our neighbor: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Other times, God interrupts the narrative of our lives, like a blinding light that enables us to truly see for the first time: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

So much in our lives, in our world, suggests that this just isn't true.

So much tells us this can't be true and will never be true.

The struggle and doubt of this false message colors the view of ourselves and our neighbor.

And yet, God arrives and greets us.

It is stunning and inspiring to reflect on the faith of Mary's profound response to God. But the genesis, the wellspring of her powerful profession of faith is a divine greeting overflowing with a life-giving promise and identity.

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

How might we walk into the world if we could hold onto those words and imagine that greeting is addressed to us? What could we accomplish? Who might we be if carrying those words in our heart?

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

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“May the sounds of Advent stir a longing in your people, O God. Come again to set us free from the dullness of routine and the poverty of our imaginations. Break the patterns which bind us to small commitments and to the stale answers we have given to questions of no importance. Let the Advent trumpet blow, let the walls of our defenses crumble, and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, well-lived in the Spirit, and still given to all who know their need and dare receive it. Amen.” (The Mood of Christmas – Howard Thurman).

¹ <https://www.upworthy.com/viral-tweet-classroom-seating>

² Curry, Michael. *Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013.

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/desmond-tutu-a-god-of-surprises/>