



**12/20/2020 Favored!**

**2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38**

**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei**

I wonder if you have come to the same conclusion I have growing up, perhaps the same fear that every child has that parents favor one child over the other. In my case, I was convinced that my sister was favored over me. Funny enough, talking to her now, she claims she was certain as a child I was favored over her by my parents. Different perspectives can give you different results.

Here I am, a parent myself, and I know in my heart neither I nor Stephanie play favorites. They all have a special place in our hearts and are all the same in our eyes. We hold the sacred conviction that if we ever played favorites, we would be a failure as a parent. So, I am convinced that, for the most part, parents don't have a favorite child. And yet, from their perspective, children tend to think that their parents are unjust and favor one of them over the rest.

Yet, God seems to play straight into that unfortunate inequality game when the angel Gabriel greets Mary with the words: "Greetings, *favored* one! The Lord is with you."<sup>1</sup> How can we understand those words without experiencing jealousy? What makes Mary so special to be favored over many other women? Maybe we can find a clue in earlier verses.

From the start, Luke promises an "orderly account" of Jesus' life. Of the four Gospels, only Luke and Matthew give us an account of his birth but, of the two, only Luke provides a record of the first twelve years of Jesus' life. From Matthew we get the story of the magi following the rising of his star and stopping at the court of king Herod; we hear of the angel's warning to Joseph in a dream to take Mary and the baby to Egypt and protect him from the king's jealousy and fear. It is in Luke that we read of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth, the trip to Bethlehem while in her final moments of gestation to fulfil an imperial order, Jesus' humble birth surrounded by shepherds, the presentation of Jesus to the temple, and, finally, Jesus' impressive conversation as an older child with the elders in the Jerusalem Temple.

Thus, from Matthew we hear the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective and from Luke we hear it told from Mary's perspective. Yet, it was not her delusional and childish perspective that convinced her that she was God's favorite. That divine preference and election was what the angel Gabriel announced on behalf of God. Again, how can that be possible if we have a righteous God who causes the sun to shine on good and bad people alike and sends the rain on the upright and the unjust?<sup>2</sup> We must assume God has no favorites since we are all called children of God.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, it is clear from God's behavior and God's very words that God does favor the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner.<sup>4</sup> God favors the dispossessed, those at the margins, those excluded from

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<sup>1</sup> Lk. 1:28

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 5:45

<sup>3</sup> 1 Jn. 3:1

<sup>4</sup> Deut. 10:18; 24:14-22; Zech. 7:10; Is. 1:10-17; 58:6-9a; Jer. 22:3-7



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society, those who are unprotected from the abuse of the rich and powerful, and those who don't count. This is evident in the words of the prophets before becoming evident in Jesus' ministry.<sup>5</sup>

It is very possible that Mary was one such poor having been born in a poor family. In one of Martin Luther's Christmas sermons, he explained that "[t]he name of the maiden was Mary. The Hebrew form of the name is Miriam, and means 'bitter myrrh.' ...the Jews had the custom of naming children from the circumstances of the birth. Now the time when Christ should come was one of utter bitterness and extreme poverty for the Jews. They were a downtrodden people and their lot was pitiable, like ours today so that all might well weep bitterly. Among the downtrodden people she was one of the lowliest, not a maid of high station in the capital city, but a daughter of a plain man in a small town.

We may infer that she was of no account because she herself said in her song (*the Magnificat*), 'He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden.'<sup>6</sup> ...In the village of Nazareth she appeared as a mere servant, tending the cattle and the house and no more esteemed than a maid among us who does her appointed chores. Her age was probably between thirteen and fifteen years. And yet, this was the one whom God chose. He might have gone to Jerusalem and picked out Caiaphas' daughter, who was fair, rich, clad in gold-embroidered raiment, and attended by a retinue of maids in waiting. But God preferred a lowly maid from a mean town.

The angel greeted Mary and said, 'Hail, Mary, full of grace.' That is the Latin rendering, which unhappily has been taken over literally into German. Tell me, is this good German? Would any German say you are full of grace? I have translated it, 'Thou, gracious one,' but if I were really to write German, I would say, 'God bless you, dear Mary-liebe Maria,' for any German knows that this word *liebe* comes right from the heart."<sup>7</sup>

The imagination of the early Church and especially Luke's imagination around the birth and infancy of Jesus have brought, down the centuries, a description of Jesus being born in poverty to a poor family. His mother, Mary, has come to represent the large body of low status people who struggle to make a living and still keep the faith. God has chosen to be borne one of them! Mary's simple and ordinary life affirms and reinforces the scandal of the incarnation. Her womb became "the physical site of the enfleshment of God." As Luther said, "Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God."<sup>8</sup> Jesus found in her a place to stay before he would experience rejection by the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Many passages finally summed up in Mt. 25:34-40; "Jesus was uncompromising in his belief that all human beings were equal in dignity and worth. He treated the blind, the lame and the [sick], the outcasts and beggars with as much respect as that given to those of high rank and status. He refused to consider women and children unimportant or inferior. This turned a carefully ordered society of status and honor upside down—even more so when he advocated moving down the social ladder instead of striving to reach the top." Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Orbis Books: 2006), 52.

<sup>6</sup> Lk. 1:48

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Annunciation*, in Roland H. Bainton (ed.), *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1948

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-12/what-about-mary>



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Mary's singleheartedness and generous compliance when she replied with her *fiat*, "Be done unto me according to your words," reveal total trust in God and the purity of her heart. She trusted what God was about to do in Christ. That makes her the first Christian believer. Reformed theologian Willie Jennings concludes: "Salvation begins with Mary's yes." In fact, the Redeemer on the cross is the Redeemer in the womb.

Mary displayed the purity, singleness, and wholeness of heart necessary to see God<sup>9</sup> and to remain united with God. God's favor of this simple young lady allowed God to carry on the salvific plan, one that would put Mary at grave risk: in fact, she risked her marriage, her social connections, and finally her very survival. The angel does not say that since she is favored by God she is going to enjoy every minute of it. Sometimes the most important things are the hardest. In these, and all things, God is with us, Emmanuel.

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<sup>9</sup> See Mt. 5:8