

Scripture

Micah 5:2–5a

The Ruler from Bethlehem

2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
 when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
 to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
 in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth;

5 and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm 80:1–7

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
 you who lead Joseph like a flock!

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Stir up your might,
 and come to save us!

3 Restore us, O God;
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.

4 O Lord God of hosts,
 how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

5 You have fed them with the bread of tears,
 and given them tears to drink in full measure.

6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
 our enemies laugh among themselves.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Sermon: Favoured One

The question last week was 'What comes first – repentance or forgiveness?'

It turns out that this is a very important question – how we answer this question will tell us how we think of God.

If repentance precedes forgiveness, that would mean that we have to recognize our own errors, come to God with sorrowful tears of contrition, and then our good gracious God will forgive us and absolve us of all that we have confessed to.

That understanding makes us the drivers – we instigate the process of forgiveness by our own effort of repentance – God is relegated to a cosmic cashier, doling out absolution in response to our own wise self-assessments.

The consequence of this is an impoverished view of God and an inflated view of self. We become the judges of our own conduct as we determine what is worth repenting of and what is justified. God becomes purely responsive – transactional. A far cry from the all powerful, all knowing, all everything creative being who is will, life, and purpose.

However, and this was the main point that I hope you took home with you last week, if God's gracious forgiveness comes first and repentance is our response, things look a lot more hopeful. God's pre-eminence and initiative is recognized, while our role is diminished, which is as it should be. If God is infallible, and I make plenty of mistakes and downright boneheaded decisions, then I want God to determine my standing with him. Not me.

If forgiveness depends upon our repentance, we will live forever in fear that we might have missed something – that in the end there may be a big black mark on our ledger that we forgot to clear. We will also live with insecurity, wondering if our repentance was good enough – if it really ‘took.’

If, instead, we begin with God’s declaration of forgiveness, then repentance is not a feverish scrambling to cover all our bases, but is an exercise in growth and discovery. We think ‘I’ve already been forgiven. I no longer need to live this way – I don’t have to be that person any longer. It is finished.’

Repentance first leads to fear and insecurity. Forgiveness first leads to liberty, life, and growth. The order of events is critical to us.

This week Mary will teach us a similar lesson about the order of things. This week the question is ‘What comes first? Favour, or obedience?’

The short answer can be found in the first words of the angel Gabriel when he appeared to Mary. ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’

Before any mention of any kind of work or expectation, the angel told Mary that she dwelt in God’s favour and that the Lord was with her.

That’s a bold declaration – who was Mary to warrant this kind of attention? She was nobody. A peasant girl in a small village far from the centres of power. Mary was completely unremarkable.

And yet, the message of the angel to Mary was that she was favoured by God.

This reminds me of the baptism of Jesus. During Jesus’ baptism a voice from heaven said ‘This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.’ Just as in the case with Mary, this declaration of love and favour came before Jesus had done anything to earn God’s favour.

It would seem that God’s favour is not dependent upon our actions or efforts. In fact, God’s favour says little about us and how we are, while it says a lot about God and who he is. If I’m reading the scriptures correctly this week and last, it would seem that it is God’s nature to favour and forgive; that God is the active partner in our covenant who keeps reaching out to us.

That being the case, why do we consistently tell the story as though things work the other way around? When we talk about Mary we usually talk about her obedience. We recount how the angel told her that she would bear a child that was not her fiancé’s and we marvel at her humble submission – that she would bear the burden of possibly losing her family and fiancé once her pregnancy became visible – just to please her Lord.

We know God's favour came first, and yet we still focus on Mary's behaviour as though in some strange reversal of cause and effect Mary's later obedience somehow brought about God's initial favour. It seems that God's free grace unnerves us so much that we will manipulate and distort the text to bring it back in line with our comfortable 'earning just rewards' worldview.

Some even go so far as to declare Mary to be some kind of superhuman – a woman born without sin and who never sinned in her own life. In this way God's favour is limited to that one special person, and the rest of us can continue earning our just desserts.

This doesn't apply to this story only. We saw the same pattern last week, that our good and noble acts of repentance will lead to our own salvation – works righteousness. This attitude of earning permeates our culture; our language is littered with adages and aphorisms that emphasize this:

To pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps.
You reap what you sow.
Pull one's own weight.
If you need a hand, look at the two that God gave you.
God helps those who help themselves.

One of my favourites is the men's prayer that is offered at the end of every Red Green show. 'I'm a man, but I can change, if I have to, I guess.'

All of these sayings imply that we have both the duty and the power to change ourselves for the better, and that it is only by changing ourselves for the better that we will earn God's love. What a burden!

This even goes so far that people feel they have to change for the better before they even come to church. I've met people who think they have to clean up their lives before they can even walk through the door of a church.

Nobody can do that – it's an unrealistic expectation. Changing ourselves is hard work, and in many cases it is simply impossible. There are things ingrained in us from birth that, try as we might, we cannot eradicate through the force of our wills.

I've been set free from a number of addictions and behaviours over the years – it did take hard work, but if I think that I accomplished those things on my own I'm fooling myself.

Human beings don't change easily, and if this is our only route to God then we are all in big trouble. We're the weak side of the covenant; if we are to bear all of the responsibility and work then we have a lifetime of labour ahead of us.

Here's a thought that should make you sit up in bed in the middle of the night. If God only loves us because we've pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps and earned that love through

good behaviour, then that also means that we can lose that love through one careless word or action. If God's favour is conditional upon our behaviour then we can't count on it. We can't rely upon it. Suddenly we find that love is not an attribute of God as we thought, but is simply a fleeting emotion of a petulant, fickle overseer.

Earned righteousness, conditional acceptance based on behaviour, striving to satisfy a God whose standards none of us really knows in detail – all of these things ultimately lead to fear, insecurity, and despair. There is no hope – no assurance – to be found in these things. You will never know if you are being good enough to be loved.

So, thank God that the path of self-reliance is largely a man-made construct. The story of Mary, and the story of John the Baptizer, reveal to us a different truth.

Mary was favoured *before* she was obedient – not *because* she was obedient. Her obedience did not cause her favour, but I do believe that God's favour enabled her obedience. Knowing that she was loved, blessed, and supported would have given her the courage to respond to the angel and say 'Yes, may it be as you have said.'

Changing oneself to earn approval and love is hard, but the way God intends things is for you to understand and believe that you are already loved. You are already in God's favour. Once you grasp this truth, once it works its way into you and you start living into it you will find that the truth will change *you*.

As St. Paul wrote 'It is no longer I, but Christ in me.' The living Spirit will do for you what you cannot do for yourself. Once you accept that you are already loved many behaviours will fall away. They will no longer be natural or necessary for you because they were behaviours that arose from a life marked by fear, insecurity, and doubt.

We may deny in public that insecurity drives us, but how many among us often feel as though we are a scared child, unsure of our standing or worth? We secretly think that everyone else seems to have it all together, that they're doing well while we're just playacting, afraid of being found out. We're afraid of what people would think if they could really see inside us.

This is the fear that comes from a performance based salvation – that we have to earn everything, that we have to constantly prove ourselves worthy.

But, once we let the worry, striving, and stress go we discover that our fear was misplaced. We learn that we were deceived the whole time. The deception is the result of putting repentance ahead of forgiveness, and obedience ahead of favour.

Here is the very simple truth. You do not have to become better than you are now. You already are better.

Let me say that again. You do not have to become better than this. You already are better than this. All we have to do is recognize this truth and live into it.

Remember the woman caught in adultery? What was Jesus' response? 'I don't condemn you. Be on your way and sin no more.' Do you think her life was changed? Was she the same person afterwards?

I would expect that she changed quite dramatically. But it wasn't due to her own effort. Receiving approval from Jesus freed her from seeking approval from other men. The forgiveness, the love, and the acceptance that she experienced from Jesus changed her. She didn't change herself.

Exactly the same is true of Mary. Her story is not primarily a model of obedience for us to follow, but an example of the miracles that happen once we fully accept that we are indeed God's favoured ones.

How would your life change if you began living as a beloved child of God? If you no longer worried about measuring up – before God and before other people? What would naturally fall away from your life that currently has a hold on you? Piling up wealth as a marker of worth? Putting down others to cover up feelings of insecurity? Seeking the approval of others by overworking and overextending yourself?

Start with this. You are favoured by God. God loves you, values you, cherishes you. Before you change, God is already loving you and is on your side. God wants you to grow and will work with and within you to that end if only you would stop struggling.

Let that truth sink deep into you, let it become part of you, and then you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.