Before the angel Gabriel told Mary “Do not be afraid,” he said to her, “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.”

She is favored. She is chosen, she will learn, to carry the son of God, the Messiah.

From our vantage point, two thousand years later that may well sound favored, special, indeed.

If we were to step into Mary’s shoes however, we may consider differently how she was favored to carry a child out of wedlock in a time and place when that could result in grave consequences and to mother a child who would be executed as a criminal by the government.

Indeed, Mary wonders, “what sort of greeting this might be.”

Perhaps we may well wonder, what does it mean to be favored by God? One scholar, Alan Culpepper writes, “Acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God’s blessing.”

In other words, “having it all” isn’t an indication of the blessing of God any more than living with a profound lack of wealth, respect, and comfort is an indication of being cursed by God.

I think agreeing intellectually with that belief can be challenging and convicting. I think living out that belief is a challenge and a conviction of another order. It’s so easy to ask, what have I done wrong that things are so hard, that I hurt so much, or that I don’t have what I most want.

Even the songs that proliferate in this season enforce the idea that a supernatural being is tying our earthly gifts or punishment to our behavior.
I bet you know the song I mean: “He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good. So, be good for goodness sake.”

Yet, Mary, a woman who could be about to find herself in a heap of trouble with her community is called “favored one” and told “God is with you.”

Can we accept that the presence, love, and grace of God is not dependent on the things that we do?

Can we accept that the number of presents under our tree, the number of friends in our contact list, the number Christmas cards on our wall, the amount of money in our bank account, or the level of health we either enjoy or struggle with is not a judgment on our worthiness?

Do we consider ourselves favored when we are called to face whatever challenge is set before us?

What does it mean to be favored? Perhaps it is what the angel Gabriel tells Mary in the very next breath. “God is with you.”

God is with you
Whatever challenge you face. God is with you. God is with us.
God is with all of us, setting us free from the fears that keep us from facing with the challenges of this life.

After it is explained to her, Mary accepts God’s favor and the task set before her. She answers in words that echo the prophets of her holy scriptures:

“Here am I, a servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”
She may well be frightened in that moment.
It would be a natural human response.
Yet, she does not let fear overwhelm her into fleeing the scene or bursting forth with angry defensiveness, as fear so often pushes we humans to do.

Instead, she finds a third option
to accept where she is, to accept the task set before her,
to accept the knowledge of that presence of God with her.

A woman named Rosa Parks, she sat down on a bus
where and when she was not supposed to
because of the color of her skin, she accepted
that she could no longer live with the way things were
and that she could do something about it.

She said no to racist discrimination and she did not run from the consequences.

What she did set off the Montgomery Bus Boycott,
which lifted the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr.,
who with legions of help made big changes in our country
including the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

What’s more is, Rosa wasn’t the first.
Other people had sat down.
Other people had been jailed.
People like Rosa, kept sitting.
Then they walked, carpooled, and marched.

What is set before each of us?
What challenge are we called to face with the help of God?
Is it saying no to someone who is hurting us?
Is it having a difficult conversation about what’s really going on?
Is it facing our fear of rejection to try something new?
I think growing the ability to face into challenging tasks
and times of conflict with that kind of patience and acceptance
can be like growing a muscle.
Through sometimes painful trial and error, I think we too can practice stilling the urges of fear that send us into fight or flight. I think we too can practice sitting in patient acceptance of the conflicts among us in order to work toward a greater peace—the peace that Christ calls us to serve.

It’s peace that Mary sang about in this song that would come to be known as the Magnificat.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant... he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...”

God’s favor isn’t like we often think of favor. God’s peace isn’t like we often think of peace.

Having it all doesn’t mean we’re more worthy than anyone else. Finding ourselves in lack doesn’t mean we are less worthy than anyone else. Avoiding conflict doesn’t mean it will go away. Yelling at someone until they apologize makes for quiet but not necessarily peace.

I believe God is with us even in our challenges, calling us to be messengers of peace—a peace that heals, a peace that loves, a peace that saves us from all fear of suffering, sin, or death. God is with us, therefore we need not be afraid to be messengers of holy peace. God is with us, therefore we need to be afraid to face the conflicts or challenges before us. God is with us, therefore we need not be afraid

May it be so. Amen.