

MOTHERS OF GOD
Sermon for Advent 4B—Luke 1: 26-38
LPC, 12/21/14

There is a relatively new addition to the repertoire of popular Christmas music. The song is called, “Mary did you know” by the Christian pop songwriter Mark Lowry. The song has been covered by such artists as Kenny Rogers and Clay Aiken, and quite beautifully by a vocal quintet called Pentatonix. The gist of the lyrics is to ask how much the Virgin Mary realized about her son when she gave birth to him.

*Mary did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when your kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God?*

Theologians have speculated about how much Mary did know when she told the angel Gabriel, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” Could Mary have possibly acquiesced if she had known what Jesus was, what it would mean, what pain it would cause her?

In a way, the question is moot. Does any mother know exactly what having a child will do to her? In point of fact, there has never been a mother in the history of humanity who’s had a smidgen of assurance about her child and what he or she might become. Being a mother is always an act of faith. In this Mary was no different from any other mother.

But Mary was special. According to the translation we heard this morning, the angel Gabriel told her she was “favored.”

Now you know I have my little quarrels with the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which we use in our lectionary, and here is another instance. The phrase “favored one” is totally inadequate. I was moved to look at the original Greek of Luke’s gospel because “favored one” is so obviously different from the traditional words, “full of grace” with which many of us are familiar from saying or hearing the rosary prayer “Hail Mary, full of grace.” I have also heard the translation, “most highly favored lady.” Which is the best, most accurate translation?

What I found out in my research blew my mind. The word translated, “favored one,” “full of grace,” or “most highly favored lady” is the Greek tongue-twister *kecharitomene* (κεχαριτωμενη). The reason this word is so difficult to translate is that it doesn’t appear anywhere else in either sacred or secular contexts. Mary is the only person called *kecharitomene* in all of Greek literature.

This strange word translated “favored one” is really a very complex compound word based on the obscure verb *charitao* (χαριτωω), which means to grant freely. To this root prefixes and suffixes have been added to make the verb passive, to place action in the past with the understanding that the effects of the completed action continue into the present, and to turn the verb into a feminine noun. Put all of this together and you get “she to whom a gift was once freely granted whose effects are still being experienced.” We are beginning to see why the NRSV translators chose “favored one.”

But this is not just an exercise in grammar. All of the complications I've described are significant. "Favored one" is inadequate. In the first place it conveys nothing of the uniqueness of Mary's situation, and it sounds too much like "favorite," as in "Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite." That is *not* what this story is intended to convey.

Let's look at the components of this word *kecharitomene*, which as I've said, literally means, "she to whom a gift was once freely granted whose effects are still being experienced." First, it describes a female to whom something has happened. She is not the agent of this thing. She is a recipient. She receives. She does not initiate. Second, the thing she has received is a great gift, freely given, a grace in fact. She has been given a great grace. Third, this great gift of grace has already taken place in the past. It is complete. However, the gift once given has ramifications that extend from the past into the present.

I am indebted for a lot of my information on this unique word to an excellent online article by a learned Roman Catholic layman, Andrew Greenwell. Greenwell concludes that since *kecharitomene*'s only known use is to describe Mary, she must be the only one whom this word can describe. I humbly disagree.

True, Mary's quick obedience to God at the Annunciation places her in a class by herself. But we also are persons to whom a great grace has been granted sometime in the past, and we too continue to experience the effects of that great grace once given. We may not be as immediately faithful as Mary was, but we are offered the same gift, and we are given her example to emulate.

As Christians, something has happened to us. We are not the agent of this thing. We are recipients. We receive. We do not initiate. What we have received is a great gift, freely given, a grace in fact. We have been given a great grace. This gift has already taken place in the past. It is complete. However, the gift once given has ramifications that extend from the past into the present.

Like Mary, we are given the choice to say yes or not to this great gift. Like Mary, we have no assurances of what exactly our agreement gets us into. Mary didn't know what bearing Jesus would mean for her, and neither do we. But she trusted God's promise that this is God's will and God's plan, and the same invitation to trust is extended to us.

As the great medieval theologian Meister Eckhart said, "We are all mothers of God, for Christ is always waiting to be born in us."

The old Christmas hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" contains the phrase, "O come to us, abide with us, be born in us today." Let that be our prayer, as it was for Mary. May we too be mothers of God.