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Chilson Hills Church
Howell, MI

“Favored One”

Luke 1:26-38

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=191312196>

Can we talk about Tim Tebow again?

I'm serious.

Last week during the sermon I admitted that I was nervous about Tim Tebow, the quarterback for the Denver Broncos who were going to face my Chicago Bears that afternoon.

Tim Tebow, in case you haven't heard, is the NFL's biggest story this year with his unorthodox, highly criticized mechanics and style of play.

And yet, he wins: 7 victories and only one loss. And he orchestrated six of those victories after playing horribly in the first three quarters and brilliantly in the final quarter or the final couple minutes.

Well guess what? My anxiety about the game proved to be prophetic. Tebow led the Broncos to a stunning, comeback victory in overtime over my beloved Chicago Bears.

It's inexplicable really. Some statisticians have estimated that the odds of a quarterback winning 6 games in dramatic, come-from-behind fashion are 1 in 380,000. So, if you ask a statistician, Tim Tebow is literally defying probability. And some might even say that heaven is on his side.

You see, Tim Tebow is an evangelical Christian who prays publicly and speaks about his faith openly. He prays that God will give him the strength for success and that he might glorify God with his play and behavior.

And while Tebow says that God is indifferent about who wins and who loses the game, that doesn't keep people from wondering if something, someone is orchestrating these victories.

The Wall Street Journal calls him “God's Quarterback,” as if God has chosen Tebow for his own fantasy football team. Even sports radio shows

in Chicago were wondering about this; Why did God seem to be on Tebow's side and what did he have against The Bears? (I have to admit, I asked the same question once or twice)

You could almost picture Tim Tebow being visited by the angel Gabriel with the same greeting Mary received 2,000 years ago: “Greetings, favored one!”

“Favor”

What is favor? When we say that someone is favored by God, what does that mean? What does that look like?

In the world of football, is favor determined by wins and pass completions? Is it on-the-field and off-the-field success? If that's not what it is, then what is it?

In the days when Mary lived, what did favor look like? Mary seems perplexed.

“Me, favored?” What does that mean?

If you make a sale, if you get a good test result, if you have a harmonious family, if you have a nice salary and drive a new car; if life is “hunky-dorey,” or at least stable enough to be considered good, does that mean God favors you?

If we believe that God's favor is defined or revealed by *success*, then I'm troubled by what that means for those who are losers.

Let's go back to that football game last week. Besides Tebow's heroics, there was one other critical factor that led to the Broncos stunning victory over The Chicago Bears.

Marion Barber, The Bears running back, had committed a mental error that allowed the Broncos to tie the game in regulation and send it into overtime.

But then in overtime, the ball is handed to Barber, and he finds daylight. He hits the hole and sees nothing but open space in front of him. But then, just as he breaks free, the ball is stripped from him and it falls into the hands of a Broncos player.

“God’s Quarterback,” the apparent “favored one” – Tim Tebow - gets the ball back and pushes them close enough to allow his kicker to kick a 59-yard field goal to win the game in overtime.

So, here’s the question. If we follow the logic that favor is defined by “success,” then what do we say about Marion Barber. Is he the “unfavored one,” “The cursed one,” or “The jinxed one”?

Let me make the question less specific and more general. If someone fails, is God against them?

If something bad happens to someone, has God abandoned them? Has God forgotten them? Is God punishing them? Has God’s favor left them?

There are two cancer patients receiving chemo treatments. One patient walks away cancer-free after six months of treatment, and the other suffers through several years of chemo before she dies after months of pain and suffering.

Who was “favored”: The cancer-free one or the cancer-ridden one?

There are two families – one lives in luxury; several cars, ownership of their home, frequent family trips to Vail and Cabo; while the other lives paycheck to paycheck, receiving unemployment benefits and sitting down to eat yet another mac & cheese dinner.

Who is favored: The struggling family or the comfy family?

Would you dare say that it’s the comfy one? Of course not.

But what about the other family? With all their hardships and struggles, how can we call that the favor of God? But if they’re not experiencing favor, then what are they experiencing? God’s indifference?

I have heard many people say – in the midst of their sorrow or their deep frustration – I have heard them say that they wonder whether or not God has abandoned them.

I have heard others express anger at God because bad things continue to happen to them.

Implicit in their expression of frustration is the theology that

Bad times= God’s abandonment and un-favor

Good times = God’s presence and God’s favor.

That’s why the story of Mary hearing the news of her upcoming pregnancy, because this announcement reshapes and redefines our understanding of favor.

Mary’s response says it all, “I’m favored? I don’t feel very favored.” What she’s saying is that she doesn’t feel very favored. She doesn’t feel as if she has done anything to deserve favor.

I know that church tradition affirms Mary’s divine, pure, holy status, but there is nothing in Scripture that seems to confirm this. Mary, it seems, isn’t favored because she is perfect, *she is “favored” simply because she has been chosen.*

Dan Taylor wrote a book called “Letters to My Children,” and one of the letters he wrote told about an experience he had when he was in sixth grade.

One of the expectations for sixth grade was to learn how to dance; specifically square dance (many of you remember going through square dancing in sixth grade). And every time it was time to square dance, they would line up the students with the boys on one side and the girls on the other, and the boys would get to pick the girl they desired (pretty awful isn’t it?).

Well, one of the girls was named Mary, and Mary was not very smart, not very pretty and not very athletic. In fact, she had a bad leg that had been damaged by a bout with polio. She had an arm that was kind of drawn up and she was overweight.

Well, as you can imagine, Mary was always the last to be chosen. No self-respecting sixth grade boy would want to dance with a girl like Mary.

But one day, Dan was approached by Miss Owens the assistant teacher who was always challenging and pushing Dan to be a better young man. She said to him, “Dan, the next time it’s your turn to pick a partner for square dancing, I want you to choose Mary.”

“She may as well have told me to fly to Mars,” Dan later recalled. “It was an idea that was so new and inconceivable that I could barely hold it in my head. You mean pick someone other than the best, the most pretty, the most popular, when my turn came? That seemed like breaking a law of nature or something.”

When it came time for everyone to line up, Dan found himself first in line. He could have the first pick of any girl he wanted. There stood Mary, in the back, half-turned, her face staring down at her desk.

“I choose Mary,” Dan said slowly.

“Never has reluctant virtue been so rewarded,” Dan wrote. “I still see her face undimmed in my memory. She lifted her head, and on her face, reddened with pleasure and surprise and embarrassment all at the same time, was the most genuine look of delight and even pride that I have ever seen, before or since. It was so pure that I had to look away because I knew I didn’t deserve it.”

Mary took Dan’s arm, as they had been instructed, and she walked beside him, bad leg and all, just like a princess.

Just like the Mary with the bad leg, Mary, the mother of Jesus was favored not because of anything she had done, but because she was the one who was chosen, because God was with her.

And the same can be said for you. You are all “favored ones,” not because of anything you have done, but because God is with you, because Christ has saved you, because God, the Creator of the Universe has made you! You are a favored one, you are chosen!

You are not chosen because you have a squeaky clean image or because you are successful – you are chosen because you *are*.

But, what if you don’t feel as if you are favored? What if you don’t feel chosen? What if you feel abandoned? What if you feel like a loser, like you’ve fumbled away your opportunities or that so many bad things have happened to you that God couldn’t possibly be on your side?

Well, let’s look at Mary once again.

She, as an unmarried virgin who has not been with another man, is told that she will conceive and bear a son who will be named Jesus.

This Jesus will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High. He will be a king like no other. The child will be holy and her pregnancy will be made possible by the Holy Spirit.

This is a glorious calling, a huge undertaking, a fantastic opportunity for any human. But Mary is just a girl and what she is being called to do has a cost as well.

In the end, she will be called to attend to the Son of God. He will be adored but he will be rejected. He will live a life like no other. He will die at a young age on a cross and it will happen right in front of her.

That may be a glorious call, but it sure sounds burdensome as well.

You see, “favor” can be a burden as well.

Being a parent is a glorious calling, but it’s also a burden.

Being single can be freeing, but it can also seem like a burden as well.

Being elderly can be a burden.

Being employed can be a burden.

Being educated can be a burden (student loans anyone?).

Living can be a burden.

And some of us, in the course of living, have been stricken with illnesses.

Some of us have households where there harmony seems elusive; where there is screaming, and fighting, depression, and anger.

Some of us have set out to be compassionate and loving to a friend, but they just can't seem to pull it together.

Some of us have been blessed with a steady paycheck, or maybe even a business, but it seems to bring more headaches and ulcers than laughter.

You don't feel very favored. You may even feel cursed, but my brothers and sisters, God's favor hasn't been exhausted. You are still God's favored ones. God has not abandoned you. God is with you, favored one.

You might even consider yourself privileged to be going through the trials you face.

Psalms 30:5 says God's "...anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

In other words, favor didn't stop when the good times end. Favor keeps right on going through the bad times, because God's presence never ends. We continue to be favored, it's just that favor is sometimes hard to see.

Everyone remembers the 400 meter race in the 1992 Olympics. Derek Redmond, running for Great Britain, was running for Gold in the 400 meter.

You all remember it; Derek running well after 100, and 200 meters. Derek suddenly pulling up, grabbing his hamstring. Derek lying on the track. The British commentator saying, "The jinx strikes again" – one had to wonder if the favor of God had left Derek. How could you say otherwise?

And then Derek is up again, limping, hopping painfully, determined to finish the race. He's

grimacing, weeping. Then, you see his dad running on to the track, he fights through security, he runs up to Derek, puts Derek's arm around him and Derek falls on his dad's shoulder. They hobble on together – father and son – all the way to the finish line.

As the VISA commercial said later in 2008 – "Derek Redmond didn't finish first or second or third or fourth. He, and his father, finished dead last. But he, and his father, finished."

Was Derek Redmond favored or unfavored? Did the favor of God leave him as he was surging towards the finished line?

No, it did not.

God's favor was with him as a blessed representative of Great Britain, one of a privileged few to run in such a race.

And God's favor was also with him when his hamstring popped. God's favor was with him when he lay on his back, and it was there with him when he began limping to the finish line. And finally, when his father arrived to help him forward, he knew that it was true.

God's favor had not left him; it was right there holding him as he limped through the pain.

"Greetings favored one!" is the words Mary heard that day and it's the words we need to receive as well. Whether we are limping or running, fumbling or scoring, wealthy or poor, sick or healthy – those words are for us as well, "Greetings, favored ones!" Because that is what we are.

And because that is true, may we have the courage of Mary to answer such news with a simple phrase, "Let it be, Lord. I am your servant. Let it be."

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, December 18, 2011's Sermon
Foundational Scripture:

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38 <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=191312196>

Sermon Series: "Expecting"

Sermon Title: "Favored One"

Question: Is God on my side?

Synopsis: God's unexpected favor can sometimes feel like a burden. But we must be willing to shoulder the burden.

Featured Scripture Reflection: ³⁸Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." And the angel left her. – **Luke 1:38 (CEV)**

Opening Icebreaker: Share about an assignment that seemed to be a blessing but ended up being more difficult or challenging than you thought it would be (i.e. – a new piece of technology, a job promotion, a new addition to the family, a particular purchase, a house etc.).

Additional Question: In what ways is it challenging to be a Christian?

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read **Luke 1:26-38**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=191312196> What stands out to you about this story? What questions does it raise? What does it tell you about Mary? What does it tell you about God?
- Read **Luke 1:39-56**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=191312274> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage add to your understanding of Mary?
- Read **Matthew 1:18-25**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=191312300> How does this passage compliment what was read in the previous passages? What does this say about Joseph?

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages affect me? (i.e. - How are these passages speaking to me?)

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, give us the strength to be your servants, submitting to your plan for our lives. Amen.