

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 20, 2009

The Rev. Canon Catherine Nichols

Who would be chosen to play the role of Mary? That was the major Advent question during the twelve years that I was serving as rector of this country parish and the Christmas pageant happened at the Christmas Eve family service, as I said every priest's nightmare. And for the role of Mary the stakes were high, for Mary got to ride up the center aisle of St. Stevens on a pony. Mary played the role of the mother of Jesus; the pony played the role of the donkey led by Joseph transporting the very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem. During my twelve years we had three equine actors playing the donkey role and twelve girls who played Mary. That Christmas Eve pageant was a high point for me, for something memorable always happens during Christmas pageants. Some of you may remember my telling this story about an unexpected occurrence. It was when the pony left a deposit half-way up the aisle. It added to the drama in a couple of ways. The pungence reminded us of the reality of living in a stable, that indeed giving birth in a stable is no picnic. The second drama was the fast-thinking girl who was playing the part that year of the angel of the Lord. In no time flat she was scooping down the aisle with dustpan and brush. She swept up the deposit and everybody laughed included the parish curmudgeon who happened to be in the pew just to the left of the deposit. The donkey's normal "donkey- activity" came to be a story we all loved to tell and everybody approved of the additional roll of the page we added in subsequent years. The page was the kid who wore a tunic and carried a basket and walked near the pony's tail. Each year the little girl chosen to play pregnant Mary on the donkey was both terrified and delighted at her roll, terrified just like Mary must have been to travel so far on a bumpy gaited donkey, so close to the birth of her special child, terrified and yet accepting: "let it be with me according to your word", says Mary to the angel Gabriel. Yes, I take on this roll, I even take on the rehearsal of the pony's ring the day before Christmas, the young girl who agreed to ride that pony would say. For Mary of our little Christmas Eve pageant being favored required short-term commitment. Balance for a few minutes on the back of a rather stout pony, but Mary of Nazareth's favor required life-long balance. What kind of favor did Mary really receive? Those of you who came to the glorious Christmas concert last week heard in a piece by our own Ben Landsverk, who wrote the music, the beautiful lines by fifth century theologian, Caelius Sedulius. "A maiden in her lowly place became in ways beyond all thought the chosen vessel of his grace – the chosen vessel of God's grace". By ordinary world standards we might not call Mary's favor really favor, after the angel Gabriel brings her the remarkable message that she's to bear God's son, she must go on a long wearing journey to a small far away village, Bethlehem, not because she chooses to go but because the foreign powers that occupy in her country have commanded that all must go in their native towns to be registered and there a total stranger in Bethlehem, Mary must undergo the pain of labor, bear a child in a pungent stable and cradle her new-born son on straw in a feeding trough. We all know the story – that's *favor*? Mary's stable scene must have been in no way as sweet and neat as our beloved crèche scenes make us out and then according to some accounts Mary and Joseph must flee to Egypt,

a far away land, with their infant son because of who that son was, a threat to Herod. Several years in exile -- that's *favor*? Then as their son grows to adulthood, Mary must watch as the poor and marginalized people of Galilee follow and love Jesus, even as those in power, even her own townspeople, regard him with increasing suspicion and hatred. And then her son is seized by the priests and rulers of his own nation accused before the Roman governor, led to a hilltop by a vicious crowd and hung upon a cross to die the death of a criminal. This is what it means to be *highly favored*? I remember the experience of one of my priest colleagues when years and years ago she was wrestling with a call to ordination, feeling perhaps that she was chosen, exploring what that might mean. A male seminary student responded to her hopes and dreams -- "oh no! Jesus is the model for men and Mary is the model for women"; you should find your vocation in something other than the priesthood". She says she filed that response away, way away, under "Twits", for she had already discovered that Mary is the model for us all. Mary hears God; Mary responds; Mary dares. In certain ways we are all favored by God and when we respond to that favor, when we allow God to lead us, we must often be brave; Mary was certainly no sissy was she? Being *favored* means being chosen. Each one of us in this cathedral is chosen to be the person operating through our lives with the various gifts God has given us. We don't know where our calling will lead us; perhaps to being mother of a controversial person, or to serving as a priest or to teaching music in a faraway place sorely in need of art and beauty, to reaching out to people who need help just "making it" in this complex and often unfriendly world. We don't know how our calling will unfold, but I am convinced that God calls us; God *favors* us to serve while we're here on God's earth. Dear friends, we are all Mary; we're all *favored*. As favored children of God like Mary we are given jobs to do. Some of us become sentimental over the glorious reading from Luke's Gospel "Greetings favored one; the Lord is with you". That's what the angel says and some of us are filled with joy because we look forward to the ways we honor Mary's *favor* through the wondrous Christmas celebrations; gifts, exalted music, meals with people we love, travel to celebrate with family or friends, but some of us hear the words of Mary's *favor* through a blue haze of loneliness or fear, loneliness in which the happy frenetic season of Christmas envelopes us because of loss, depravation, fear because of poverty or perhaps unchosen aloneness or our own "lostness" . Whether we joy in Mary's story in her brave strength or see Christmas as a time high lighting out own loneliness, fear, brokenness, we can nonetheless embrace Mary's *favor* if we agree to discern the ways God has favored us. *Favor*, being chosen, might well be for us as it was for Mary, hard work. But there lies deep within each of us the potential for accepting *favor* -- "Be with me according to your word". Just like Mary in the model for all of us, we can hear God and accept. Mary wasn't smarter than we are; she didn't have special knowledge; she, like us knew only her past; she did not know what lay ahead of her, but she was brave enough to trust in God, to trust a wider and deeper vision than her own. We can do that too; we can be like Mary -- all of us, for God favors each and every one of us. That's the significant part of the "Good News" of Christmas. Hail, favored ones, the Lord is with you all!