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Luke 1:46-55; Matthew 1:18-25

FINDING FAVOR

There are a lot of Christmas songs out there and not all are created equal. There are clearly the ridiculous and silly songs: Frosty the Snowman, Jingle Bells, Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. There are ones so annoying that if you are like me you turn the station as fast as you can when they come on the radio. There are also the sacred carols, some of which we sing here tonight: those that tell the story of Jesus' birth. But among all of the songs, the one that stands out not only for the beauty of its tune but for its profound theology is *O Holy Night*. It begins in a similar way to many other songs, talking about the night sky: "O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear savior's birth." But then it shifts into theological high gear. "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth." That one line captures the meaning behind God's great gift to us at Christmas: into our brokenness and darkness, Christ comes with the message of our worth.

Some of us may have a hard time believing this message of our worth. We may have internalized messages from our parents or teachers or bosses, or maybe from society at large, that we are not smart enough, or beautiful enough, or that we don't measure up to expectations, or that we are a disappointment, or not successful enough. Maybe our communities of faith have wounded us with messages that who we are makes us unworthy of love or acceptance, or that we have done something that cuts us off from God's love. Certainly after reading the stories in the newspaper or watching the evening news, it would be reasonable for any of us to question humanity's worth. So can we really believe the words of the song? Can we really believe that we are worth something?

However, God does not judge our worth by the same terms that the world ascribes worth. The world assesses worth based on what kind of car you drive, the size of your paycheck, the clothes you wear, the job you hold, your body size and shape, the people you associate with. The world assesses worth based on your accomplishments and achievements in life. But God does not assess our worth by the same standards. In fact, our worth to God is not based on anything we do or don't do. Now of course, we people are capable of doing many wonderful and beautiful things, things that no doubt please God. We can craft symphonies, heal sick bodies, extend compassion, and show generosity and do many other wonderful things. And yet, we can and do indeed also hurt one another with words and weapons, act selfishly, are cruel to others, and ignore human suffering. Within every single one of us lies light and darkness. And yet, our worth is not dependent upon our "getting it right." Our worth is rooted not in earthly accomplishments but in God's love. We don't have to be good enough before God will love us. It is God's love that makes us worthy. It is God's love that makes us worthy. Like any good parent who loves their child not for what the child does but because that child is precious to them, God loves us because we are precious to God. The story of Christmas, the story of Jesus being born, is the story of God entering our story because we have worth.

But the worth with which God regards you and me is not the same as some earthly parents who become so enamored with their children they can't see their faults. The worth God has for you and me does not ignore the reality of our brokenness. In fact, it is precisely because God sees how broken we are that God comes to save us. In Matthew's gospel account, the angel tells Joseph that Jesus' purpose for being born is so "he will save people from their sins." In other words, God regards us, you and me and every single person, as too beloved to risk losing, too beloved to risk losing to all the forces of darkness and hate and selfishness.

Throughout the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we here at University Church have been exploring Mary's famous song called the Magnificat. We heard that song tonight in the litany we used for the lighting of the Christ candle. It is a rather radical song that Jesus' mother sings. Mary sang about how God had looked with favor upon her. Yet this was surprising because she was nobody of any worth in her society. She was a female in a patriarchal society. She was poor and from a backwater village. And she was unwed and pregnant, making her especially worthless and rejected by others. But in choosing her for the task of being Jesus' mother, God affirmed her worth. Mary sings about how she, a person of low status, has "found favor" with God. And then she sings about how God will bring about a great reversal of circumstances within society. The lowly will be lifted up, but the proud and the powerful will be brought down from their thrones of power. The hungry will be filled but the rich will be sent away empty. Now if you are a person who is oppressed, or hungry, or in need Mary's song sounds like good news. You have found favor with God and have received God's special care. But if you are a person who is who is pretty comfortable in your status in life, if you are one of those who has already been filled with life's many good things as many of us here tonight are, well, Mary's song might not sound like such good news. Instead of finding favor, it sounds an awful lot like judgment is headed our way.

However Mary's song is indeed good news for every one of us. In Mary's song, we are given a vision of our worth in God's eyes. God loves us too much to sit by while we humans distort our worth. God's love will not allow us to be lost to our pride and conceit and self-centeredness. God's love will not let us be lost to greed or cruelty or the abuse of power. We are too beloved to risk losing. And so God enters our story in the person of Jesus to save us because

we have worth. You and I and everybody has found favor with God. God desires for us to know our worth!

Thus, Christmas is not just a story about a baby being born but is about God making a declaration: God loves you! You have worth and value. Jesus enters our lives to teach us that we have found favor with God, that we have worth. And *then* Jesus teaches us how to walk around in our worth, how to let the light of God shine within us. Because we have worth Jesus teaches us how to love. Because we have worth, Jesus teaches us how to forgive. Because we have worth, Jesus teaches how to be generous. Because we have worth, Jesus shows us how to extend compassion.

Love is what gives us worth--God's love. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.