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## God Meets Us in Our Desire

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given January 1, 2017  
The Feast of the Holy Name: Luke 2:15-21*

Let's do an informal poll. And as always before I do something like this, I should say that there is no right answer. How many of you made definite New Year's resolutions? How many don't do that sort of thing? Who is still thinking about it? I think New Year's resolutions can be great, or demoralizing, or anything in between. They are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. I think we can all agree that New Year's resolutions are about change. They are about transformation. My brother in law Dave is in the fitness business and he told me recently that New Year's is the busiest time of year for most clubs. Every year gyms gear up to accommodate the hordes of people who show up out of the woodwork at the gym on January 1 to begin a new workout regime. And most of those new folks have dropped out by some time in the first quarter. But some stick with it. Dave said that the ones who stick with it are the ones who have connected their new year's resolutions with something deep in who they are, something true and profound about what they really want. Regardless of whether you are a person who makes New Year's resolutions or a person who hates that notion, let me ask you a question. What kind of transformation do you long for? If you could have any change in yourself or the world around you this year, what would it be? Please hold onto that question, and your thoughts about it. We'll come back to it.

Today is not just New Year's Day. It is also the Feast Day of the Holy Name of Jesus. What does that mean? Please bear with me—I'm going to give some background information to help us understand what significance it might have for us today. Today is the eighth day after Christmas, which according to Jewish tradition is the day Jesus was circumcised and given his name. Names in scripture are important; they reveal something significant about who a person is what purpose God has for them in the world. The Angel Gabriel told Mary to name her baby Jesus. And the name Jesus is just the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. Perhaps some of you might remember that Joshua was the leader who took over from Moses after Moses died. Moses was the leader who led the people of Israel out of slavery and bondage in Egypt, and who led the people through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. But it was Joshua who led the people into the Promised Land. Joshua, like many people in the Hebrew scriptures, originally had a different name than the one he ended up with. His original name was Hoshea, which just means salvation. But Moses changed his name to Joshua, which means the Lord Saves. God saves. Jesus was named after Joshua, and his name means the Lord Saves.

But that name, and that meaning, might be just as tricky for us as understanding what the significance of the Feast Day was all about in the first place. Salvation is a word that some folks in the contemporary church have lost any real connection with. Some of us were raised to believe that salvation was only about the afterlife, and we have all sorts of questions and concerns about what kind of God creates a heaven and a hell. But even if salvation is about more than the afterlife, how many of us feel like we need saving in the here and now? I think we all do go through really difficult periods in our lives in which we cry out to God for help and rescuing. But the rest of the time we're OK and moving along as best we can and we might need a lot of things, but saving isn't one that comes to mind. Salvation can sometimes sound like the generic Christian answer to a question nobody is asking in the normal course of events. In this culture, in which we value independence and strength and initiative and success and those sorts of values, who would admit to need saving even if they did need it?

The Greek word for saving is the same word that also means healing and restoring. In Luke's Gospel the word save is used to apply to many kinds of transformation and change that Jesus gives to people – from healing a woman who had been bent over and unable to stand upright for 18 years, to Zacchaeus who was restored to right relation with his fellow Jews after years of being an agent of Roman oppression to them, to the light Jesus was bringing to Israel and to the world that had been sitting in darkness. In each case, salvation looked different, depending on the needs and desires of the person or group of people that Jesus encountered. The salvation Jesus brought was not a generic one-size-fits-all solution. Jesus encountered people, found out what their deep pain or longing was about, and offered a healing or a transformation that restored the person to community and being able to fulfill their purpose in the world.

New Year's resolutions and salvation are both about transformation. The meaning of the Feast of the Holy Name is that lasting transformation occurs when we open ourselves to the presence and power of God who alone can save – in this life and in the life to come. The key is in recognizing and responding to the God who initiates and accomplishes the work. It's about the difference between Joshua's original name—Hoshea, which just means salvation—and Joshua, which means God saves. Whether you make a New Year's resolution or not, this year I'd like to invite us *not* to white knuckle ourselves into diagnosing our problems and solving them all by ourselves. Instead, I'd like to invite you to find a way to get in touch with your deepest longing for transformation, and from that place, seek the presence and power of the God who meets us in our desire.

The stories of Jesus show us that God encounters us in our desire. God meets us there, in our specific needs, and wants, and longings. And precisely there, in our uniqueness and vulnerability and need, God saves.

As I asked you at the beginning of today's talk, I'll ask you again: What do you really want? What change do you seek? Sometimes, it's hard to answer even that question. This New Year's Day I'd like to invite you to a practice for the next month. If you've already decided on a New Year's resolution, by all means please do go ahead and continue with that. New Year's resolutions can be just fine. But try adding this one practice, which I myself am planning to do. Every day when you

wake up, I'd like to invite you to pray a short prayer in which you ask God to help you experience life in its fullness for that day. To encounter that day as fully and honestly as you can. And then, at the end of the day, ask yourself what you found the most life-giving and the most draining that day. For this month, use this practice as a way to live life neither white knuckling yourself into productivity, nor reacting to everything, but to live in a way that responds to the presence of God in your life. Do this every day for a month, so that by the end of the month, you might be able to answer the question, what do you really desire? What do you really want?

God meets us in our desire. The name Jesus means that God saves; God encounters us as we actually are, and offers transformation, healing, restoration, and salvation, in this life and in the life to come. In the end, this salvation, though it is personal, is not intended for ourselves alone. Every time we are healed or transformed we impact the world around us for restoration and wholeness, which is the will of God for the entire cosmos. Let it be so. Amen.