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## The One To Say Yes

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017*

*Luke 1:26-38*

This morning we celebrate the last Sunday of Advent, before we turn this afternoon to the crowds and pageantry and joy of Christmas Eve. Now I know perhaps some of you didn't realize we wouldn't be celebrating Christmas Eve this morning, and you might be disappointed – but to you I would say first that you can always come back at 2, 5, 8 or 11! And second, the fourth Sunday of Advent, which is our holy season of hope and longing and preparing, has something really important to teach us that will help us take in the gift we are offered in Christmas.

In this final Sunday of advent, the reading from Luke's gospel tells us a beautiful and curious story about how Christmas started. It started with a most unusual event: the Angel Gabriel is sent by God to a young woman named Mary. Gabriel explains to Mary that God is with her, that she need not be afraid, and that she has found favor with God. Then he says that she will become pregnant with a son who she is to name Jesus, which means salvation, or healing. Now Mary is not stupid. She has to realize that though this would be a great, sacred honor, it will also entail real risk. It's risky because she's being asked to consent to bear a child out of wedlock, which even as a young teenager, Mary knows this will involve possible shame and conflict with Joseph and their families and the opinion of her friends and neighbors. But somehow, despite all this, something in Mary responds to the message of Gabriel. She hears that God is doing the impossible, God is sending salvation to a people sitting in darkness, God is making the barren generative in her aunt Elizabeth – and so she says yes.

And I've been curious about that yes since I first heard this story again as an adult after I had taken a twenty year break from all things Christian. I've wondered why God waited so many centuries or even millennia to send Gabriel, to begin the process of becoming flesh and dwelling among us. If the name Jesus means salvation, which also

just means healing, and when saving and healing are so urgently needed everywhere all the time, why would God delay?

I have a very imaginative disposition, which sometimes takes creative license with the scriptures, and so I've wondered the following. What if God had sent the Angel Gabriel to make this same proposal to many people, over and over again throughout the centuries, seeking always to become closer to us and save us and heal us, and Mary was just the first one to say yes?

Now of course the scriptures don't say this, but they don't tell us every detail of God's action either, so I hope you'll bear with me on my imaginative journey. God told Mary that she need not fear, that she was favored of God, that God was sending salvation and healing to her and through her, that God was doing the impossible for her and for those around her. What if this is exactly the message that God was sending to countless unknown people throughout time, and Mary was just the one we heard about who said yes?

Now I'm not saying there wasn't something unique about what God was offering Mary – there was one Jesus of Nazareth, one Word made flesh. But perhaps Mary was not unique in herself, perhaps God offered many people God's favor, perhaps we all enjoy God's favor. But what could that even mean? After all, we experience hardship and suffering and loss. We find it difficult to love each other unconditionally, so it's hard to believe that unconditional love is possible. I mean let's face it, the God who made us must not always be happy with the choices we human beings make, in the world of abandoned refugees and adultery and fake news and addiction and violence and such great divisions between those who have plenty and those who have nothing. When the Angel tells Mary she enjoys God's favor, that is actually a reference to the ancient practice of the year of Jubilee, year God commanded the Israelites to observe, where all debts were forgiven, slaves freed, no work permitted, even the land had to lie fallow. The Year of Jubilee, the Year of God's Favor, was a year of celebration and rest and amnesty for all—and who could believe God would treat us this way? Who could dare to believe that this kind of love and forgiveness would be available, not just to Mary that day long ago, but to each of us, personally?

God said to Mary, I am going to send you the Holy Spirit, and you will conceive a salvation that never ends. Your life will be generative, and what you conceive will be healing. In fact what you conceive will be holy, the product of God's own presence and person. Who would dare to believe such a thing?

But Mary said yes. She dared to believe she could experience an utter amnesty and jubilee and favor from God. She dared to believe that God could make her generative, when it was impossible, and that she would conceive God's own presence, a presence that would be saving and healing for all. What if this is not different from what God offers and asks of us? What if all we need to do, is not to white knuckle ourselves into being better people and doing more ethical things, but to consent to the radical love and presence and initiative of God in us through Christ? What if all we need to do, to begin with, is to believe that we can experience the unbounded favor of God, before we've done anything to deserve it? What if through Christ, God desires to make our lives generative of salvation and healing for others? What if all we need to do start this journey is to say yes?

In postmodern society, it's hard to take anything at face value. We've learned the hard way that authority can't always be trusted, that leaders of every political persuasion often distort the truth, that we live in a world that is competitive and entitled and violent. But Israel in Mary's time, living under Roman imperial rule and Caesars who sometimes went crazy, was no different. Today, this last day of Advent, the finale of our waiting and longing and hope, let's listen for God together. What if no matter what is going on in the world scene, or in our culture, or our families, or within us, God is always whispering in our ear, always moving toward us for healing and saving? What if God is always seeking to make the impossible possible and to make us generative? What if God could send salvation and healing to you and through you?

Advent has always been about preparing for Christmas. But the truth is that nothing at all can prepare us for Christmas, which means God is With Us, the Word is made flesh. Even Joseph and Mary, knowing they would give birth to God's Son, ended up having him in a barn with the animals. The only thing we can do truly to prepare for Christmas, is to be the one who says yes.