

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent 2014 4B
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“Nothing will be impossible with God.”

It's a simple, startling pronouncement from the angel Gabriel, one that, perhaps, we still have a hard time believing. And the difficulty lies not in those kind of existential conundrums that high school philosophers are so fond of, like: “Can God create a stone so heavy God can't lift it?”

No, the difficulty here is much more personal. What we have a hard time believing God is capable of is the transformation not of the cosmos but of individuals, of people we know. It can be hard to believe that God can save the people we dislike or mistrust. It is almost impossible to believe that God can or will redeem those we fear or hate. And for some of us it seems utterly impossible that God can save, or even care about the person whose faults and shame and guilt we know best: ourselves.

And to stand against those fears and doubts and disbelief we have this very odd story of a young woman learning that she is to have a child not in the normal way that people learn these things – not through the signaling of her own body, or through a home pregnancy test, or through a visit to a doctor – but through the visitation of a strange and frightening creature who speaks in

the language of the ancient prophets and says a bit more than just that she is going to have a baby.

And if that weren't strange enough, Gabriel also tells her that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is also with child. Two women, one too old and one too young, and both pregnant. But nothing will be impossible with God.

But, of course, the heart of the story is not what Gabriel says to Mary, but what Mary, in the end, says to Gabriel.

For Mary says yes.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Poor Mary! She doesn't really know what she is saying yes to. And you have to wonder if, at the end, after the rebellious teenage years, or her son's painful repudiation of his birth family, or the shame and horror of his execution, she ever thought, “boy – if I knew what I was getting into, I might have thought twice.”

And this is the human heart of the story. The news may have come in a unique way, but Mary's “yes” is universal. None of us, whenever we say “yes,” really know what we are agreeing to. Things never turn out the way

we imagined, hoped, or feared. Sometimes they turn out worse, sometimes better, sometimes just different, but things are *always* different.

Things that are supposed to change our lives don't. Decisions that seem inconsequential at the time turn out to make all the difference. We, like Mary, never really know what we are saying "yes" to. We're not blind – we play the odds. Experience teaches us which choices are most likely to have good results. But sometimes our most thoughtful choices go wrong, and sometimes our casual assents lead us to unexpected and glorious places. You just never know.

But because we know more of the consequences of Mary's choice than she did, we know that God stays with us as we live out the consequences of our "yeses." And we know that no matter how awful the results may be, God has the power and the desire to turn things to good.

Mary doesn't know all that she is saying yes to. She doesn't know she's signing on for Good Friday, for outliving her child, but she also doesn't know she's assenting to Easter.

Advent is the season of waiting. The story of the Annunciation reminds us that we never really know what we're waiting for. When the incarnate God comes into our lives, we have no idea where we will be led. When the Holy

Spirit enters our lives, we may be called to act in strange or scary ways on God's behalf. When our own angels offer us choices about which path to take, who we are to become, our timid or hearty "yes" will lead us to places we cannot even imagine.

Which is the point, really. The reign of God, the good things God has in mind for us *are* beyond our imagining. Whether you trust in God's love or doubt that God could really care about you, the reality of God's love is beyond imagining, beyond understanding, almost beyond belief.

And the Christmas we wait for – the real Christmas, not the presents and the parties and the carols, or even Mary's baby in the manger long ago, but the Christmas where God is born into our lives, our hearts, our stories; the thing we are asked to say "yes" to – will lead us to a place beyond sorrow and death, beyond even the joy and glory of resurrection, to the unimaginable, indescribable, incomprehensible, immeasurable, but not impossible love of God.

Amen.