

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017
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I love art, all forms of art. I love music and opera and ballet. I love sculpture and architecture. I particularly love painting. A few years ago, when my wife and I just happened to be roaming through St Peter's in Rome, I came upon a medieval painting of the scene depicted in today's Gospel, "The Annunciation." Since then I must have seen at least fifty paintings of the Annunciation, all masterpieces. Each of these paintings seem to have one common element, a single white dove over Mary and the Angel's head. The dove represents, of course, the Holy Spirit. Rays of light almost always emanate from the dove and seem to be entering one of Mary's ears. The artist's point is that Mary heard the Word of God. That was how the Holy Spirit overshadowed her. That was how the Word of God became flesh through her. I can hardly wait every year for the Christmas Mass during the day. It's my favorite reading, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us." Jesus conceived by the Holy Spirit through Mary's ear, through her hearing the announcement of the Word and responding, YES.

Mary was given a choice. God sent an angel to whisper sweet nothings in her ear. He called her "full of Grace". He told her that the Lord was with her and that she was blessed among all women." Right there, in these words of Gabriel, we learn everything we need to know about Mary. She was united to God from the first moment of her existence. She was full of Grace. She was the one who was chosen, blessed among women. She was the one whose desire for God was being answered. The Lord was with her. Mary was so open to God that she could receive the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit during her normal day. She didn't have to journey to the Temple to experience God. She lived in his presence. Pope St. Leo the Great put it this way: "Mary bore God in her mind before she bore him in her body." Her desire for God, in fact, was so intense, that she immediately responded to the angel's message. She immediately set into motion the very action of our salvation.

The world waited for her answer. She could have refused to allow God's plan to work through her. She could have agreed begrudgingly to the plan, like Zechariah, John the Baptist's father did when the Angel Gabriel spoke to him in the Temple, or Mary could have rejected God's plan. But Mary was open to the Word of God. She allowed the Word to enter her and transform her from a simple maiden to the mother of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, to the Queen of the Universe. She was open to the Word of God, and the Word of God used her to transform the world. Mary said "Yes!" to the Word in her ear and became the Mother of God. As if the Christ child on the fluttering wings of a dove imperceptibly moved in to her to be conceived to take up the space of her YES.

This desire that Mary had to be his handmaiden; leads us to ask, "Do we really desire him? Do we crave his presence to come and return our world to his original plan? Do we really want our lives to be transformed by the presence that we celebrate on Christmas Day?" That same Word of God whispers sweet phrases of love into our ears, yours and mine. The Word of God blows in our ears, dwells in our hearts, makes us temples of his very breath, the Holy Spirit of

God. He calls us to continue the transformation of the world. He calls us to make the Savior real to those who long for his presence. Will we reject the Word and force Him to look for another ear? Will we obey grudgingly and limit His action through us? Or will we decide to say yes? Say yes, to following the Lord, and offering ourselves totally to God!

The Word of God calls us to nurture the presence of Christ within us. We are not pregnant like Mary became, but we still have the Living Jesus within us, our souls are pregnant with acts of the Holy Spirit. Like an expectant mother, all of us care for this new and wonderful presence. We eat the food we need, the Eucharist, to allow this Presence to grow. The Word of God whispers into our ears and calls upon us to bring this Divine Presence within us to others. We do this by standing up for our faith. We give birth to the Holy Spirit in the world through our acts of loving kindness. We do this by searching out those who need His Strength. So many people hurt at Christmas time. People who have lost loved ones need special attention. People who are wandering the world listlessly, from thing to thing, need special care. People who are sick and elderly and wondering if this will be their last Christmas, need the assurance that God's love will usher them into an eternal Christmas.

In joyful hope, we are here on this Fourth Sunday of Advent because we have chosen Jesus Christ. We recognize our humanity, our weakness, and we seek strength to remain faithful to our choice. We look to Mary and her example, her great virtue, her obedience. Mary is the New Eve who brought new life, Divine Life, to the world. What a wonderful time we are living in. Not just Christmas time. We are living in the age of the Word of God. His Presence is within us. His Presence is around us. His presence is real. He is Real! The Word of God was whispered into Mary's ear, and she conceived the Christ! The Word of God is shouting into our ears, and we can transform the world with His Presence. We too can sing in the words of David Haas, "We are God's work of art, created in Jesus the Christ. We have been enlightened by the Lord. Walk as children of the Light!" Hail Mary, Full of Grace. Because you let God work within you, we have become the Masterpiece of His Hand.