When the angel Gabriel came to Mary with the announcement that she would become pregnant, Mary could have done all sorts of things.

She could have laughed, as Sarah did when messengers sent from God said she would bear a son in her old age.

She could have said that what the angel told her was so outrageous that she didn’t believe it – much like Zechariah did when Gabriel appeared to him to say that his wife would carry and give birth to John the Baptist in her old age.

She also could have said, “No,” and justified it. After all, she was in the middle of planning a wedding and being pregnant by the Holy Spirit would present a little bit of a problem. In that culture, the penalty for being pregnant by anyone other than a husband was death by stoning. She could have said “No” because she valued her life – a pretty good reason for saying No to God, right?. Even if she wasn’t put to death, she risked losing her fiancé and her reputation. At best case, the wedding dress would have to be altered. All good reasons why we might feel Mary would have been justified in saying No. What she was called to do was just too hard.

But Mary didn’t laugh. Although Mary marveled at how this could come to be, she believed. And most importantly, Mary didn’t say No. Mary said yes, when almost anyone in their right mind would have said No. Mary said yes and embraced her identity as the Mother of God. Saying yes was actually the only choice Mary could make and remain true to her calling, to be consistent with who God created her to be. And because Mary said yes, God worked a miracle in her that transformed her and transformed the world.

I’d like us to reflect for a few minutes about what it looks and feels like when all of us say Yes to God’s calls to us – not just the easy ones, but the tough ones that we feel we would be justified in saying No to – the ones that are risky, or really inconvenient. The calls from God that change us

Perhaps God calls us to take a stand against an injustice we see in society, a systematic law or custom that demeans a group of people. Perhaps all of our friends support this injustice; perhaps, even we have supported it indirectly for years as well. To turn around now would be to change our lives and alienate friends. One example of someone who did this was Thomas Clarkson, who started out seeking a career as an Anglican clergyman, then realized in the 1780s that his call was to work with the Quakers toward legislation in the British Parliament to outlaw the very lucrative slave trade. He received death threats and lost many of his friends, yet he persisted, helping to recruit William Wilburforce to the cause. About 30 years after Clarkson’s work began, Parliament finally passed the bill outlawing the slave trade.

Perhaps God calls us to open our home to someone who needs shelter or who is being oppressed – a homeless person, a refugee, a special needs child. Saying yes to such a call would disrupt home life as it currently is and might carry some risk. Suppose the homeless person steals from us; suppose the special needs child takes more time and money than we anticipated. Yet people have answered similar calls throughout the ages; consider, for example, those Europeans who hid Jews in their homes to save them from death in Nazi concentration camps or those who hid escaped slaves as part of the underground railroad.

Perhaps God’s outrageous call is to give up a career that is lucrative but for which we feel no sense of purpose for one that pays less money but answers a call. All vocations are holy if they are the vocations to which God has called us, but sometimes we pursue a vocation because it has good earning potential for us. Then we realize that we were called to something different – that our true identity lies in a vocation that is less stable, more risky. Perhaps this is a call to a career in the helping professions; maybe it is simply a call to a job that provides better life-family balance.

Perhaps God calls us to blow the whistle on some wrongdoing we see – even at risk to ourselves. One example is Peter Rosk, former executive at both Wyeth Pharmaceuticals and Pfizer. At Wyeth, he was demoted for speaking out against accounting irregularies. At Pfizer he was ostracized and ultimately fired for criticism of various profit-yielding practices, including the high price of drugs.

We, like Mary, may feel a call to do something outrageous – something that really changes our lives, throws us into insecurity, or that even violates ourselves as we imagined ourselves to be. We, like Mary, can laugh, or doubt, or say No. Yet, now quoting Cynthia Rigby, a professor of Austin Theological Seminary, if we say yes, God transforms us from “virgins” who are unable to bear God to the world, to creative agents for whom, with God, “nothing is impossible.”

We are called to answer God’s outrageous proposals to us as Mary did, saying “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” When we willingly answer God’s call to do outrageous things in His name, God works miracles in us. God transforms us. God transforms the world.

Amen