

God's "Yes!"

Isaiah 43:18-25; 2 Corinthians 1:18-25

*As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes and No"
...For in Christ every one of God's promises is a "Yes."*

"Yes and No" ... the most fundamental expressions in human communication.

These two words are potentially the most powerful words we can say,

or the most dangerous, or the most fulfilling,

or the most meaningless, depending on how we use them.

And these words have an almost unlimited range of intensity,

from the slight nod of the head, to the "yeah, whatever",

to the "YES!!!" of a Steelers' touchdown.

or from the nonchalant wave of the hand, to the "nah",

to the emphatic "NO!" of a two year old.

Speaking of children,

life with a 5 and a 3 year old seems to be an endless string of 'yes's' and 'no's' –

Yes you can do this; No you cannot do that;

and – in our house – there are usually about 3 no's to every yes.

Sometimes the word 'No' seems too short to get the point across,

especially when we're dealing with children.

So every now and then, the 'no' gets spelled out for emphasis (N-O, no!),

or even elaborated upon in questions like

"What part of 'No' don't you understand."

And sometimes, the 5 and the 3 year old are victorious,

finally wearing down their opposition until we give in with an exasperated "yes"

or, "Oh, go ahead."

Saying yes and no is also the basis of our consumer society.

Economic growth depends upon getting consumers to say 'yes' to the many options provided,
the many products and services on offer:

Yes to the newest, shiniest, most advanced SUV;

Yes to the fashion of, say, Ralph Lauren,

so even if you don't *have* old money, you can *dress* like you do;

Yes to the Nike swoosh,

which will empower you to dunk like Jordan, or swing like Tiger,

and then go on to meet all of your personal goals in life.

'Just buy it' then you'll be able to 'just do it.' Just say yes to Nike.

Or just say yes to Mercedes, or Nissan, or Ford, or Buick,

just say yes and you will achieve your dreams and be very happy,

and look very good in the process.

We live in a culture that has become very savvy at getting us to say "yes."

And, to many, it appears that our saying yes has gotten way out of hand.

We have been propelled by unseen powers, by an invisible hand,

into a massive, global frenzy of need-creation.

Only by creating more and more perceived need in the world,

can we increase the people who are willing to say 'yes' to what we are selling.

Only by saying 'yes' to more and more things that meet our ever-increasing perception of need

can we continue to increase our so-called standard of living.

Thus we have become highly sophisticated at getting people to say 'yes.'

It doesn't much matter anymore what their genuine needs are,

as long as they just say 'yes,' just do it, just spend the money.

Until eventually human beings no longer live in touch with a natural environment,

we live in a foreign environment;

We are exiled from our own humanity,

forced out of a wiser way of life that nourishes us, body and soul,

and forced into an environment that bombards us with consumer choices

choices that we really do not have to make
but which have come to seem like necessary choices, such as
which cosmetic enhancement do I need most;
or should I spend my money on the sunroof, the CD player, or the power doors
...or why not spend a little more, get them all, and be really happy.
and since this computer is over 4 years old and takes nearly a minute and a half,
I probably need to buy a new Dell.

What part of no don't we understand? Any part of it, it seems.

We'd like to think we could "just say no." But there is no such thing as a simple no.
Just saying no leads to various forms of persecution within the context of our exile,
various intense pressures to conform.

Juliet Schor, in her book *The Overworked American*, tells stories of people
who make intentional choices to drop down in their standard of living,
by, say, cutting their weekly hours back from 70 to 40, or from 40 to 30.
Their testimony is that dropping down often means dropping out of the social sphere
in which they are accustomed to living. That is, they have to change friends
because they cannot afford to play, travel, eat, or belong to organizations
at the same level as before.

Saying no to over-indulgent ways of living carries its own set of consequences.
Saying no to the idols of our contemporary culture –
conspicuous consumption and possession,
the latest power of technology,
the finest fashion,
the richest food
means no longer belonging, no longer fitting in our environment the way we used to.

But our 'yes's' and our 'no's' have deeply spiritual implications for our lives.
Our 'yes's' and our 'no's' either connect us

or cut us off from the Source that will truly nourish our lives;
Our 'yes's' and our 'no's' are either driven by unchecked emotional and spiritual forces,
or they are chosen based on careful principle.

For the Christian community, we strive to let our Yes and No be shaped by Jesus Christ;
shaped by habits and practices of a life that abides in God;
a life governed by just and humane principles,
such as moderation in consumption,
and hospitality to the stranger,
and stewardship of God's creation.

But, as we have seen, the faithful, disciplined saying of Yes and No
requires deep spiritual resources for a people who are exiled in a culture
that is unfriendly, even hostile, to this good news of God's life.

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The biblical people of Israel were also forced into Exile.
They were taken from their homes and forced to live in Babylon,
surrounded by foreign gods whom they were encouraged to worship.
But their exile was more than physical and geographical, it, too, was deeply spiritual.
The people gradually forgot the Lord their God.
Perhaps they never said a direct 'no' to God,
but because of the many 'yes's' they began to say to the options of the culture around them,
God's purposes for them, God's presence with them,
gradually slipped out of their awareness.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to this exiled community,
calling them back away from the idols of Babylon
to the worship of the One God of their ancestors.

I read this Isaiah passage to the Session of our congregation last Tuesday night

and asked for their input.

Several of the elders were perplexed by the *tone* of God's voice

which seems fluctuate, seems to move back and forth between sentiments,
seems to be inconsistent.

First God offers hope to the exiles, saying:

I am about to do a new thing...I will make a way in the wilderness...rivers in the desert...

Later God sounds stuck in self-pity, unable to let go of the hurt caused him by the people

*You did not call upon me...you have been weary of me...
your have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings...
or honored me with your sacrifices.*

One moment God seems to adore the people

*I give water in the wilderness...to give drink to my chosen people
the people whom I formed for myself...*

Next moment God seems unable to bear the people any longer

you have burdened me with your sins...you have wearied me with your iniquities...

Is God saying Yes or No to the people?

Again, it sounds fairly typical of a frustrated parent.

Not to be trivial, but it sounds like the father of a young child – say a five year old child –

when, after dinner, the father gets her attention,
and reminds her to wash her sticky hands after leaving the table.

Then, after a brief moment of inattention,

the father turns to find his daughter playing in the hall
just outside the bathroom door, putting her sticky handprints on the wall.

He raises his voice in frustration, asks her what she is doing, commands her into the bathroom,

laments the fact that he had just told her, not one minute ago, to wash her hands
and now, look, there is baked apple goo on the wall!

But not ten minutes later, the father is down on one knee

giving his child a hug and a kiss, telling her he loves her, and will see her in the morning.

Granted, that's a little too homely to compare to idol worship.
And God's anger toward the unfaithful chosen people
was over much more substantial transgressions than sticky apple goo on the wall.
But perhaps this scene is not too far different from
the agonizing love held in God's heart for God's people.
I love you; you betray me.
I save you; you forget me.
You weary me; I forgive you again and again.
I will not remember your sins.

In this amazing glimpse into the heart of God,
In this agonizing struggle of the heavenly parent,
the yes of God's love cannot be overcome by the no of God's wrath.
In the end, God's mercy prevails.

*I, I am He
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins.*

It is this victory of God's love, the victory of God's 'Yes' that Jesus came to show us.
It is God's ultimate 'Yes' to humanity, in all of our broken-down, pathetic mess
God's ultimate 'Yes' to us that is decisively revealed in Jesus Christ.
“...the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you... was not 'Yes and No';
but in him it is always 'Yes.'
For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.'
For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen', to the glory of God.”

In Jesus Christ, every one of God's promises is a “YES”!

We might be persuaded to wonder if this can be true.
Can it be true that God's promises are all fulfilled for us

in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
Given the horrendous images of violence, warfare, suffering and hatred
that flood our eyes from the newspaper;
given the noisy reports of ambassadors, generals, secretaries and inspectors
which clamor in our ears,
can it be true that God's promises are all Yes to the world
when so often it seems God has finally said No and turned away to leave us to ourselves?

The Apostle Paul helps us with this question

by an interesting turn of phrase at the end of our reading.

He says God has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our heart

as a first installment.

That is to say, the full payment has not yet been made. There is more yet to come.

The Yes of God's promises stands in the face of every crisis,

whether a crisis of war, a crisis of terror, a crisis of inequality, a crisis of hunger.

God's Yes still stands, and there is more yet to come. Watch for it,

and live *into* it in the now.

And finally, it may be encouraging for us to note

that it is not a grand, global audience to whom Paul writes his letter.

These words were written first to a local community of faith, a congregation.

It is in the lived witness of little congregations, little communities of faith,

like this one in Corinth,

like this one in Glenshaw, PA,

It is through the lived witness of these congregations

that God's promise lives on,

that God's affirmation of life lives on,

that God's undying love lives on,

that God's 'yes' to the world lives on.

The first installment has been given to us in the Holy Spirit who lives in our midst.

It is now through our choices, our decisions, our words, our “Yes’s and No’s”
that we make God’s Yes visible to the world:
in simple acts of hospitality,
in strenuous efforts of service
in sacrificial giving to the *true* needs of the world
in endless imagination and ingenuity
in making the good news of God’s love seen and heard.

God says ‘Yes’ to us – ‘Yes’ to the world.

For this reason it is through Christ that we say the “Amen”
to the glory of God.