

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
January 24, 2010, Journey Worship Service (8:45 am)
“When God Says No”
Samuel 7:1-13

The scripture reading for today picks things up in the middle of the story. Saul has died and David has been made King of Israel. He has just named Jerusalem as his capital city. To consolidate his power there, David built a palace for himself and then brought in the sacred Ark of the Covenant, combining in one location the political and spiritual authority of the nation. However, David began to feel uneasy when he recognized the disparity between his royal palace and the simple tent used to house the Ark of the Lord. As he put it, “I live in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” So he decided to build a temple to the Lord, and the prophet Nathan goes along with this plan.

This is, Nathan agreed to it for about 24 hours. During the night, Nathan had a dream in which the Lord spoke to him and vetoed the temple construction plans. God said, “I am the Lord of all the earth, who was with you during your captivity in Egypt and your wilderness wanderings. Would you now confine me to a building made by human hands? In time, I will bless the building of a temple, but it will not be done by David.” Nathan had the difficult task of going back to King David and telling him that God had said “No.” David’s disappointment was tempered by God’s promise to firmly establish David’s descendants upon the throne of Israel. But it still raises an interesting question: What happens when God tell us “No”?

That’s not a question we think about too often. We like the idea of a God who always says “Yes”; who answers every prayer and grants our every wish. But no loving parent will always, always say “Yes” to her or his child. And God is a loving parent. We’ll come back to this question in a minute.

There are times in all our lives when we are told “No.” Friends will tell you “No.” Your spouse, your partner, your kids, your boss will tell you “No.” Your checkbook, your calendar, your doctor, your car mechanic will tell you “No.” We may well wish for things to be one way, but not all wishes come true. As much as we long to hear “Yes, that is possible”, the truthful response sometimes is “No, I’m afraid that won’t work.”

Things in life do not always work out as planned. But as mature Christians, it is important to remember that life telling us “No” is not the same as God telling us “No.” God is the Lord of all life, but God is not synonymous with all life, which includes stars and galaxies, this planet, plants, animals, and lots and lots of people. There are three basic rules about life that affect every one of us:

1. Everything that lives also dies. We may long for immortality and avoid thinking about death, but we are finite creatures whose life has a clear beginning and definite end.
2. Every relationship takes work to make it work. Whether we are talking about parents and children, employees and employers, or loving relationships between adults, it takes patience and effort to make all relationships work.

3. Six billion people, all living on the same planet and all with free will, are bound to clash and bump into each other on a regular basis. Your “Yes” will inevitably conflict with someone else’s “No” and vice versa.

If you try to ignore or argue with any one of these three rules, life will be quick to offer a rebuttal. We may believe we are being treated unfairly when our health deteriorates, when we struggle in our marriage, or when groups of people threaten us or seem to have advantage over us; but when we complain about this, some will invariably shrug their shoulders at us and say unsympathetically, “That’s life.” As I said, life is finite; relationships ebb and flow and require work; conflict and war happens on earth for a variety of reasons and, “No,” we cannot change those fundamental facts.

But God almost never gives a one-word answer to our questions about life. Think about it. God’s answer to the finitude of life includes the good news of the risen Christ, who is Lord over life and death. God’s answer to the difficulty of human relationships includes the gift of grace for strength as well as forgiveness. And God’s answer to violence and terrorism and social unrest is the call for justice that seeks out ways to love one another and live peaceably in community. God rarely tells us “No”; God instead promises to be beside us when life tells us “No.”

That’s a lot to digest, so are you still with me on this topic? To talk about hearing “No” from life and perhaps hearing an answer that begins with “No” from God is not a simple subject. Some people try to make it into a neat and tidy conversation, especially preachers. Some have said that what looks like evil can actually be transformed by God’s infinite wisdom and power into things that are good. They point to the old story of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. By being in Egypt, though, Joseph was able to predict a famine and ultimately rescue his own family. Near the end of his life, Joseph forgave his brothers, saying “You intended to do harm to me, but God intended it for good to preserve many people” (Gen 50:20). There is truth in those words, but any answer that tries to claim that all evil is ultimately for a larger good offers little immediate comfort.

Other people compare the experiences of life with a work of needlepoint. The tangles and knots we experience in life are like the messy, dangling threads on the underside of a piece of needlepoint embroidery. But when seen from the other side, from God’s perspective, the jumbled threads combine to make a beautiful picture in which each thread, each piece fits together perfectly. That too makes a nice sermon, but it doesn’t offer a lot of comfort when your life feels like a bunch of messy, tangled threads.

There are things we can learn from moments of suffering, but it is important to remember that it is not God inflicting the pain. There are times we glimpse beauty emerging out of the tangled threads and messy relationships in our daily life, but God is not intentionally causing the tangles and messiness in order to somehow weave a beautiful tapestry. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God taking on human flesh, means that God is most present amidst our suffering even as God remains the one who sees the big picture. God is beside those who weep and struggle with anger and

disappointment. God is in the midst of the knots and tangled relationships of this life. So whenever we pray out of our despair and suffering, God will always offer something deeper and richer than a simple one word answer.

Remember how the apostle Paul struggled with his “thorn in the flesh”? In 2 Corinthians, Paul talked about praying three times to the Lord that it would leave him. We don’t know exactly what this thorn was – whether it was a physical ailment or an actual person tormenting and persecuting Paul. But God did not remove this thorn, replying instead “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). What appeared to be a “No” answer was actually a longer answer promising that grace will be given in Paul’s time of need, and that God’s full power is always best seen through times of vulnerability and humility and weakness. Such as in a weakened Savior nailed on a cross out of love for us.

Or come back to the story of David’s request. He wanted to build a temple for the Lord, but that request was turned down by God. A temple was not part of God’s plan, but a house was. Not the kind of literal house that David imagined, but rather a house, or dynasty, of David’s descendants who would sit upon the throne of Israel for generations to come. God said “No” to David’s request so that God could say “Yes” to something that would last far longer than things made of stone and mortar. This house built by God would give hope to the young Israelite nation. It would become the basis for their expectation of a Messiah – expectations that outlasted the temple of Solomon and the kingdom of Israel, expectations that were eventually fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ, who was of the house and lineage of David. It’s true, God told David “No” but then gave a “Yes” answer that far exceeded his wildest imagining. God promised a relationship that would be eternal, a commitment that is unbreakable, and to erect a house with God’s own Son as its cornerstone and foundation.

There is no getting around the fact that life includes difficulties and suffering. Life does seem to tell us “No” a lot. God also says “No” at times, but God never gives a one-word answer. God’s answer includes additional words about being with us until the end of the age, about grace that is sufficient for our needs, about building a house that will last forever out of the stones and experiences of our lives today. God’s answer includes other words about a shepherd who seeks lost lambs no matter where they wander, and about a loving parent who welcomes all prodigals home. God’s answer was there in a humble manger birth as well as on a cross of suffering comparable to every experience of suffering we endure. And God’s answer always includes the empty tomb on Easter morning, the rush of a wind on Pentecost, and the vision of a heavenly place of eternal hope, healing, and peace.

It is a sign of wisdom to be able to tell the difference between when the world says “No” to us and when God says “No” to us. But it is a deeper mark of faith to hear God’s “No” to us as only the necessary preamble to a loving, gracious “Yes” waiting to be spoken next. Thanks be to God.

AMEN