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Lent 1B, We Say YES
Peace, Seattle
Mark 1:9-15

GETTING TO "YES"

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul writes:

> As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been YES and NO. For 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 AMEN, to the glory of God.[1]

Let us pray. Gracious God, who accompanies us on all our journeys. Lead us to say YES to you this day…YES to your good news…YES to your call…YES to your mission. For we pray in the name of the one through whom every one of your promises has become a YES. Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Four year olds, I'm discovering again, are an interesting bunch.
Charming, imaginative, engaging, spirited, and yes, stubborn.
If you think the "terrible twos" are challenging, wait 'til they turn four.

Autonomy—as always—is the name of the game, of course; doing it "my way," being in charge. (Which is a good thing in the long run, because eventually we do want them to leave the nest, right?)

But at age four she is so much more articulate and stronger both in will and muscle than at age two. She's retained the ability to go from charming to sulky in a nanosecond, but now she can stay there longer, and say NO with so many more inflections, in so many more surprising and determined ways.

Helping her get to YES is becoming an art form around our house, and we're doing our best to expand our repertoire. But when our best parental efforts can't make her budge, Chris and I call on her brother Kai and something nearing the miraculous often happens.

Kai, will you please get Naomi up? And off he goes…
And through his charms, his sibling sweet talk, his gentle cajoling and the promise of rewards we'd never think of, much less get away with, he somehow manages to get her to YES in a way that we just can't. And when it works, it's great.

How do you get there in your life, in your household?
What's your path from the no-holds-barred NO to the unqualified YES?

During these past four weeks, the stewardship team has invited us to think about what it means to SAY YES to the one who meets us here week after week in word and sacrament; what it means to respond to his invitation by saying YES to him, YES to our shared mission in this place, and YES to sharing our selves, our time, and our financial resources to keep our mission vital and growing.

Bob, Jenn, Julie, and Kevin have each answered those questions from their perspectives.
And now the rest of us get a turn to SAY YES. And as we do so, we take our cue from Saint Paul, who writes: **For the Son of God whom we proclaimed among you, was not YES and NO; but in him it is always YES.**

[1] 2 Cor 1:18-20

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With Christ it is always YES and his YES always, always comes before ours.
Indeed, his YES comes even when our YES has gone missing; even when, with brows furrowed, and arms crossed, our lips form their singular, stubborn **NO!**

Even then, God reaches out to us through baptismal waters with unconditional love and says—I LOVE YOU…NO MATTER WHAT.

The truth of the matter is, we can only say YES because he has already uttered his YES.

As we enter the Lenten season the colors change around here; we exchange the WHITE of Christmas and the GREEN that follows Epiphany for the PURPLE of Lent.

As a child, my sister Randi had skin that bruised easily. When we got into arguments as kids, she'd warn us not to touch her. We brothers shrugged off nicks and bumps and wore bruises and scabs like badges of honor. But pinches on Randi's arms and bumps on her legs would turn to purple blotches in minutes; and she hated seeing them on her fair skin.

Now purple, as any four year old knows, is the color worn by kings and queens. And in this season we see the reign of God taking shape in the life and ministry of Jesus—the one who would be king.

But this king's path, we quickly find out, is not about sumptuous living or the exercise of power as the world knows power. This king's path is one of self-limiting, self-emptying; one of suffering. And the purple that accompanies him and us on this Lenten sojourn is not so much the royal color as it is the annoying color of a bad bruise.[2]

And the first stop? The wilderness.

In Matthew's gospel as in Luke's, the story of Jesus' wilderness temptation is told in riveting detail. But here in Mark, one verse says it all:

HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS FORTY DAYS, TEMPTED BY SATAN;
AND HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS; AND THE ANGELS WAITED ON HIM.

In Matthew and Luke Jesus is "led" by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism.
But Mark offers a very different account of what happened. According to Mark, Jesus is ***driven*** by the Spirit into the wilderness—the word is εκβαλλω—and instead of a white dove, as at baptism, Mark's language conjures up the image of a desert hawk pursuing Jesus with talons at the ready.

Driven **into the desert,** Jesus comes out on the other side with a message and momentum that will carry him through his entire ministry.

Of the three accounts, Mark's seems the most honest to me. At those times when I've found myself in wilderness places, the journey there has always felt a lot more like being driven than being led.

For Jesus, going into the desert isn't a matter of wanting to or not, it's a matter of SAYING YES to God's will; it's a matter of obedience. If Jesus is to be God's instrument for bringing God's saving power to the world, then Jesus, like the prophets before him, must walk that desert road.

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[2] Ronald Luckey.

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And so he goes. And for 40 days he practices saying YES to God and NO to everything NOT of God. And at the end of it, accompanied by wild beasts and attended by angels, he is prepared to go the full distance; to say YES to all that God has in store for him…even his own death and resurrection.

Fred Niedner, who teaches at Valparaiso University, points out that the Hebrew word for "wilderness," (*mid-bar)* comes from the Hebrew word for "word" (*da-bar*).

Linguistically, to get to "wilderness" you begin with "da-bar" and add to it a preposition that means "away from" or "without." What you end up with, then, is a word for "wilderness" that translates:
"The place where words don't work anymore," the place beyond or without words.[3]

Many of us have stood in that wilderness place in our lives, that place where words stop working; where the experience of loss or illness, betrayal or tragedy leaves us "without words."
Over the last week the news has been full of such stories.[4]

Saying YES to God doesn't mean we simply accept these forced experiences of wilderness.

But what it does mean is, even when we find ourselves there, we can still find our way to YES because we are companioned by one who walks with us step for step, stride for stride; who will not leave us orphaned; who's been to that place without words, and has come out of it with this Good News embedded within him: **that God is in our midst and on our side come hell or high water—forever and for good.**

Week after week our liturgy teaches us how to do this, how to get to this YES.
The gesture you see me make each week during the *Great Thanksgiving*—you've heard this before—is a gesture built on the idea of **lifting up all that we are** and **all that we have** to the heavens.

It goes like this…(lift your hands with me)
LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS – we lift them to the Lord
LET US GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD OUR GOD—it is right to give our thanks and praise.

The subtext of this exchange is that what we have been given is not ours to keep, but rather ours to share. And every time we do so, we are SAYING YES!

In the flood of grace at the Font and the unending feast at the Table we learn from Christ again and again what it means to trust God and give ourselves away.

There are a million and one reasons we could find—and sometimes do—for saying NO to God's call and claim. But today…TODAY WE SAY YES!

> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim among you, is 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.

Amen?
Amen!

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[3] From notes taken at the biennial Holden Theological Symposium. See my fuller article by following this link: http://www.peacelutheranseattle.org/?p=297
[4] The following tragedies all took place February 19-26 in the Puget Sound region: Four skiers/snowboarders fell victim to avalanches in one day, leaving their families shocked and bereaved; an 8 year old Bremerton girl was accidentally shot by her 9 year old classmate in their third grade classroom; a troubled and violent young man took the life of an exemplary Washington State Trooper and then his own; a Washington State Park employee was killed in a collision with a drunk driver.