

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, February 21, 2010 based on Luke 4:1-13

Saying Yes to God

Chelsea B. of the great state of Maine wrote this when she was still in high school: *My fifth-grade year was off to a good start, except I was lacking one thing – friends. As the seating chart would have it, I was sitting next to the other person in the class who also didn't have friends at school. She was new to public school as she had been home-schooled to that point. Right off, we became good friends. As the year passed we realized our similarities, and our friendship grew deeper. She once mentioned that she was going to youth group at her church. She told me how much fun she had and about all the great people that she knew through her church. I was curious; I had been to church on the holidays and occasionally to Sunday School, but youth group? What was that?*

As time went on, she influenced me greatly. Soon enough, she had me listening to the Christian rock station that she listened to. She often taught me about the message in the lyrics and what it meant to her. One day in our conversation, I asked a question, and she referred to the Bible for the answer.

I wasn't quite sure what to think. I had never read the Bible before and certainly didn't understand the words that she read to me. Her solution to this was to bring me to her youth group, which I later realized was a Bible study. During the lesson I was taught of steps that I could take to clean my soul because that is what that church thought was important.

This was one of many lessons that were emphatically preached to me; however, it wasn't the individual lessons that impacted me the most. It was the community and the sense of love among the people that intrigued me. As time wore on, I began to attend my own church more frequently and I became more involved. I soon discovered that the church that my friend attended had very different theological perspectives than the church that my family attended, nevertheless, the community and sense of love was the same.

In retrospect, what my friend had given me was more than her friendship. What the lessons had taught me was more than scripture alone could speak. What I had found was my faith.

I have a question for you today. My question is, "When was the first time you said 'yes' to God?".. When was the first time you said 'yes' to God, and when was the last time you said 'yes' to God?

Our scripture today is about Jesus saying "yes" to God. Now you may be thinking, "wouldn't Jesus say "yes" to God because he was God?" That's a good question. The people who wrote the New Testament had an evolving opinion about Jesus.

Mark the first gospel written about Jesus seems to emphasize his humanity. John the last gospel written emphasizes his divinity. Matthew and Luke seem to be somewhere in between.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is a man that is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit according to Luke 1. It is that same Spirit that touches Jesus at his baptism, and it is that Spirit that leads Jesus into the

wilderness after his baptism where, as you heard today, he is tempted by the devil for 40 days.

Do you know what surprises me about our scripture passage today? It's the only conversation I can think of that Jesus has with a non-human. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we hear the voice of God now and then, as in the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism that said God was pleased with him. We also heard God's voice last week in the scripture that Pastor Kim had read for Jesus' transfiguration.

We also read about Jesus praying to God continually and witness Jesus praying to God in the Garden of Gethemane the night before he died. This is the only place we hear Jesus' words to God.

But this passage in Luke 4 and the similar event written about in Matthew 4 is the only place I can think of in the gospels where Jesus speaks to a non-human. And that conversation is not with God but with the devil.

Now, I need to tell you that the devil, Satan, the tempter is not mentioned very much in the Bible. As one scholarly journal puts it: *In the Bible, Satan is not a well-defined figure. There are some differences between the notion of Satan in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and nowhere is there a definitive description of Satan. As a number of recent publications have pointed out, Satan is a character who continued to develop post-canonically in different directions in Christian history.*

When I read the New Testament, Luke seems to support the theory that believers had at the time that believed that since God was good and benevolent then there must be an evil non-human force in the world that

was opposed to love, health, wholeness, and peace. "Satan" became the force that was identified as that separate force from God. This theory of good and evil appears in the Book of Revelation, one of the last books written that is in the New Testament.

In the Book of Revelation, humans are pawns between the forces of God and Christ and the forces of evil and Satan. The Book of Revelation is one man's account of how God and Christ overcome the forces of evil in a supernatural display of power and might.

So, here we have Jesus talking to this non-human power called "the devil" which means the tempter. The issue seems to be how Jesus was going to use the power that came from the Holy Spirit that he had just received at his baptism. He is given 3 ways to use this new power – make bread out of stones, become the sovereign of the world, and do something miraculous to prove he was from God. Each time, Jesus uses scripture to say "no" to these suggestions and "yes" to what he thought God was calling him to do. Jesus was tested according to Luke about how he was going to use the power he was given.

We are tested about how we are going to use power we are given all the time. Each of us has some kind of power, and throughout life we are given more power - We become the supervisor of a new department. We can use that power to work together to meet the company's goals and make it a fulfilling experience for everyone, or we take advantage of the other workers, make them do all of the work, and take credit for their efforts.

We bring a child into the world, and for many years we have complete power of that child. We can abuse them and take advantage of them and hurt them, or we can use our power to guide them and help them as they become the best human beings they can be.

You see, each of us has some kind of power, and the more power we acquire, the more opportunities we have to use it wisely or to use it for personal gain over others. The wise use of power seems to be the question going on in our state right now. Illinois has huge obligations to our schools, pensioners, social agencies, but little will power to find solutions for the common good. With power comes responsibility.

We can use power for ourselves and others in a fair way, or we can use it for purely selfish gain, or we can even use it in ways that brings pain and hurt to others. How do we know what is the right way to use our power?

Jesus did it in scripture today by being armed with scripture. Jesus knew about the God of love and the justice of God based on the scripture of his day and said "yes" to this God for how he was going to move forward. Jesus used his power to be about love, health, wholeness, and peace. When we say Yes to God, we are being invited to experience love, health, wholeness and peace.

Robert Voyle, who is an Anglican priest, a therapist, and the inspiration behind my sermons series, writes that *one of the main reasons people do not, or cannot, say Yes to God is because the god they imagine saying Yes to is not perceived as loving or trustworthy*. He goes on to speak about a pastor he knows who grew up with the childhood admonition that "Jesus would get him" for being naughty. This "Jesus" literally drove him to drink.

It took fifteen years of sobriety, through a Higher Power and Alcoholics Anonymous, to decontaminate his image of Jesus from the bony-finger-wagging guilt-monger of his childhood to the Loving Power that restored him to sanity.

The New Testament scholar N.T. Wright tells the story of a student coming to him one day and saying he didn't believe in God. Dr. Wright's response was: "Tell me about this god you don't believe in." After the student shared his thoughts, Wright responded: "Well, I am not surprised you don't believe in that god; I don't believe in that god either." The student's apparent resistance to believing was actually an act of wisdom in rejecting an unbelievable God.

What kind of God do you believe in? Jesus seems to speak about a God of love, health, wholeness, peace, and presence. This god invites us on a journey that invites us to say Yes to God, Yes to neighbor, and Yes to ourselves, and shows us how our life is so much richer with these three Yes's.

We will be talking about these 3 yes's in the weeks ahead as part of our Lenten journey, and we will be learning how these 3 yes's give our life purpose and meaning. In scripture today, Jesus trusted God enough to say Yes to God and because he said Yes, he could say no to demonic ways to use his power.

Like the young lady at the beginning of my message, sometimes we don't have enough knowledge and background of what we are to do to follow this God of love and grace. So I have a suggestion for you, I invite you to read the gospel of Luke as part of your Lent devotion. It's about 35

pages in most bibles and it has the message and parables of Jesus that give us hope, faith, and direction. Armed with scripture, we are invited to say Yes to God everyday because everyday we have choices and decisions to make.

Dr. Robert Voyle writes: *I grew up on a farm in a stable, caring family in New Zealand. Compared to most of the world, my childhood was idyllic. However, my recurring existential nightmare as a child was of being in a prison and escaping. Just as I was about to be recaptured by the monsters of my dreams I would awaken shaking and terrified. My religious experience as a child in the Anglican church was relatively benign. During my early twenties, my faith deepened. I was ordained in the Anglican Church and subsequently served most of my ministry in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Instead of delivering me from my nightmare, the deepening of my faith just made it worse, both in intensity and frequency. The harder I tried to be faithful in practicing my faith, loving neighbor, and serving God, the more miserable I became, and the nightmare worsened. While I preached a God of love and grace, clearly I lived with a god of fear.*

What I have discovered is that learning the cause of my nightmares was actually unimportant. Knowing why I was in the "jail" was unhelpful. What was really helpful was learning how to be free. This was my first lesson in paying attention to outcomes. I worked hard to discover the cause of my misery without learning how to be happy.

The second lesson I learned was that the language we use for God evokes metaphors or images of God in a reciprocal spiraling, self-

confirmatory way. And just because you and I might use the same name for God, that name may evoke very different metaphors and images within us. I found my path to freedom by paying attention to the outcomes of the language of habit and using language that consistently freed me rather than constrained me. I found that using transpersonal language of Spirit, or Love, or Source, more helpful than highly personal language such as Father or Jesus. Begin at the place where you can say Yes to love, and from that place keep finding the places where you can say Yes!

My language may have changed, but I am still a follower of Jesus. I still call him Lord, but the Lord that shows up is not the fear monger of the past but the heart of love, the heart of the universe, which was once embodied in a Jewish carpenter. To that heart of love I can truly say Yes!

To say Yes to God is to say Yes to love. What can you say Yes to today? Amen.