

**THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES: SAYING NO; GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-7;
MATTHEW 4:1-11; LENT I/MARCH 5, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

It is no accident that at the start of the bible, after God has created man, woman and the Garden, the first thing we learn – before we learn about the Cain and Abel or the flood or the Ten Commandments or anything else – is the importance of saying no.

The biblical writer tells us at the very start of the human drama – like a flight attendant on an airplane before take off giving instructions to the passengers about oxygen masks, flotation devices, exits and what to do should the plane go down – the biblical writer tells Adam and Eve what to do to survive life.

We are given the gift of human existence, and here in Genesis we have an operating manual for full and abundant living.

This story in the Garden, which we will come back to in a moment, parallels today's account from Matthew of Jesus at the threshold of his ministry. Before we know anything about Jesus – other than his annunciation, birth and baptism – we have this story about his encounter with Satan in the wilderness.

One commentator says, 'something about Jesus stirs evil into resistance'; what we are witnessing is the moral/spiritual equivalent of that law of physics that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Matthew tells us the same dark forces that emerged in the serpent when God instructed the man and woman not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, are also at work confronting Jesus before his ministry begins.

So before he calls his followers, discusses the kingdom of God, preaches, or performs any miracles the first thing Jesus does is to say no; and not just once but three times. It is an odd way to introduce the Savior of the world. But it is also what happens in Genesis when the man and the woman make their debut. The ancient texts alert us to the inherent longing in this finite existence for more that can shadow our days, our relationships, our lives, and distract us from our best selves.

This insatiability, call it evil, confronts Adam at the start of his life; it stalks Jesus at the start of his ministry; but whereas Adam fails to say no as he was advised, Jesus rejects the tempter's suggestions for how to use his power to enhance his life.

It's worth noting the tempter tries to disguise his nefarious plot to distract Jesus from his mission by recommending three laudable, commendable acts. The dark forces do not always come to us as invitations to do that which we know we should not do; sometimes, they are more subtle and sophisticated and come to us disguised as good deeds no one would object to. C.S.Lewis captures this deadly charm better than anyone in his *Screwtape Letters*.

Each of the good deeds: providing food for the hungry by turning stones to bread; demonstrating God's power by throwing himself off a tower to have God save him proving God's existence; or having power over the entire world to do with as Jesus wanted if he submits to and worships Satan; each of these offers tempt Jesus to be free of God, rather than trusting in and relying on God every step of the way.

You see, in the Genesis story, Satan wants to skew the order of roles and relationships established at the creation: humans to God, to one another, and to the natural world; and, in Matthew, Satan wants to drive a wedge between Jesus and God. If he can confuse humans and distract Jesus he can accomplish much for his dark mission.

As the texts point out, the only thing standing between the man, the woman and the serpent; and between Jesus and the tempter is the little word “No.”

But “No” is a word we generally do not like to say or hear. You remember the story of the little girl who prayed for a bicycle for her birthday and when her birthday came and there was no bicycle, crestfallen, she said to her mother, “God doesn’t answer prayer.” To which her mother replied, “Yes he does honey, sometimes he just says, “No.”

‘No’ is a boundary, a fence, a wall. ‘No’ stops the flow of things. ‘Yes’ is open country, a free pass, a green light.

You could write a history of the universe from yes and no; the big bang=yes; black holes=no; peace=yes; war=no; birth=yes; death=no.

We can’t have one without the other. If we didn’t have light, we would not know the experience of darkness. If we didn’t have ‘no’ we would not know what ‘yes’ means. Paradoxically, each *defines* the other.

That’s what binary opposites do as the poet of Ecclesiastes reminds us: to mourn/to dance, for war/for peace, to be born/to die. Opposites give dimension and definition to life.

Like other ancient texts: from the Greek poets and philosophers to the Upanishads to the Koran – these stories sort out our understanding of human nature, our moral and ethical responsibilities and the nature of God.

The writers use literary devices of the time-parable and myth-to convey profound truths. To judge these stories as simplistic or lacking scientific credibility would be like reducing the value of a masterpiece painting to the worth of the frame or a classic car for what you could get for the scrap metal.

If joy and sorrow define the emotions; and work and play human activity; and light and dark physical energy; then yes and no define freedom. Neither one by itself is freedom, but the interplay, the dialogue, the call and response, of yes and no depict, describe, define what freedom is.

The story from Genesis tells us we have choice, we are free. Some philosophers and scientists reject the idea of human freedom. The biblical story tells us not only that we are free but that there are consequences when we exercise our freedom for better or worse depending on our motives and principles.

The stories today of ‘no’ are stories of our freedom. Adam and Eve get it wrong. Jesus gets it right; the epic narrative of God’s people is the history of a people who experience God’s grace even when they misuse their freedom.

These stories are our introduction to Lent and to the power of our ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Lent is about sorting out the voices of life from the counter-voices of death that haunt our lives.

Let's look more closely. In the Garden, Adam and Eve are warned of this 'other tree.' – all of the Garden and its fruit are for the man and woman to enjoy *except* the other tree. This other tree is dangerous because it disrupts the ordered way of the Garden. It seduces humankind out of its proper role and capacity in the Garden.

The fruit of this tree skews the self-perception of the man and woman. They begin to see themselves as God, this perspective empowers them toward the things of God, takes their innocence and unleashes their rapacious appetites.

The serpent is identified in the story not by decisive action like God, but by his 'craftiness'; he creates options for the humans outside the options God has given them. The serpent is a means through which the gift of life is forfeited by falsely perceiving reality. The woman and the man misconstrue their relation to God, to one another and to their place in the Garden. The account is not only an indictment of their inflated sense of self, what the Greeks called hubris; it is an invitation back to the single voice that speaks the lean truth of our future.

Jesus, however, immediately perceives the false paths the tempter suggests. The power to feed humankind is met with 'humans do not live by bread alone.'

Satan raises the ante: "I will give you control of the kingdoms and their politics if you worship me." How timely this old story. We are witness, these days, to a satanic hold on our politics and politicians. It is the drug of power! What's of interest is that Satan casts political power in terms of worship. "I will give you all this power (to do good) if you bow down and worship me."

Indeed, politics has become, some say, a functional equivalent for God. The state is the source of our security, demands our ultimate loyalty and gives us purpose. If you consider the wars we fight, casualties we sustain and resources we expend it would be hard to think of another cause or commitment that demands such allegiance.

What Jesus does at every turn, and Adam and Eve fail to do, is practice self-denial for the sake of preserving his allegiance to God. Lent used to be a time for the practice of self-denial. Giving up desserts and other simple pleasures was a metaphor for denying greater pleasures that, were we to indulge them, could take control of our lives.

What if the Christian life is as much about what we choose to give up, and say no to, as it is about what we say yes to? Such a perspective might cause us to ask what we are not willing to do or say because we are followers of Jesus.

John Bogel, faithful Episcopalian, founder of the Vanguard funds, who lives a modest life like Warren Buffet when it comes to material things quotes Kurt Vonnegut and says, "I have something most Americans don't have, I have enough." Gandhi, for an extreme example, died with only a bowl, his eye glasses and his robe. Such self-denial is a choice not to be enslaved by material things, yet be able to say yes with one's whole being to life-affirming goals and commitments. The doping of athletes to expand their capacity to super human levels is the modern equivalent of the apple from the forbidden tree. Yet, these athletes merely mirror the values and aspirations of our society to have it all.

Where does that leave us at this start of Lent? If today's stories cause us to begin to consider exercising our use of the word "no" that is a good thing. Another way to look at it is that saying "no" to some things enables us to say "yes" to a higher cause or truer self or physically and spiritually more healthy life style.

Jesus' final week is the quintessential illustration. When the crowds extol him and Judas wants him to start a revolution to thwart the Roman occupiers, Jesus says, "no." In fact, that revolution would come just seventy years later and end in utter disaster for the Jewish people.

When Pilate, in the praetorium, gives Jesus the opportunity to absolve himself, Jesus refuses to betray his cause or his allegiance to God. Only in the Garden of Gethsemane does he express the burden of his mission and ask for relief, but then he leaves that lonely place of prayer to rouse his lethargic disciples and undertake again the events that lead to his execution and death. But, of course, the end of the story is not the cross but the empty tomb. Good Friday's 'no' enables Easter's 'yes.'

Saying 'no' in today's stories raises the question of how we exercise our freedom. Humans often make a mess of things. Our longing for more, like an addiction, can escalate to the point of destroying marriages, families, and careers and if not destroying then distorting, confusing and wasting our lives.

We say when you've made a mess of things enough times or when you've really screwed things up you hit rock bottom and suddenly get honest with yourself and everyone else, including God. That's Ps 32 the choir sang today.

You see your rationalizations as lies, but your best self as honest, humble, and giving. You become more consistent in saying 'no' to the voices of death and 'yes' to the voices of life. The person you are called to be, your true self emerges in your relationships and goals in life. All of it can come crashing down with a few self-serving, self-inflated decisions, so you make it a point to say your prayers and stay close to that higher being or power that gave you your life back again after you crashed and burned. And you make it a point to stay close to people who are on the same path, who talk the same language and who will hold you accountable and support your decision to say 'no' and responsibly exercise your freedom.

No one can do it alone, that's why this church family from knitting groups to garden groups to Lenten dinner groups and all the other ways and places we gather to get to know and support one another and carry out God's mission, that's why this place and the people are so important.

The stakes are nothing less than life and death.

Before God's people entered the Promised Land and a new chapter of prosperity and abundance, Moses had a heart to heart talk with them. He concluded by saying, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." It was the idea of women and men who were free to make that choice that thrilled God in the very beginning. Amen.