



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 6 (C)

God's Yes

[RCL] Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Today's Scriptures are filled with binaries...

The Prophet Jeremiah shares God's Word: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals... Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.

The poetry of the Psalms begins with: Happy are those... who delight in the law of the Lord. Doomed are those... who walk in the counsel of the wicked.

In the Gospel text, Jesus echoes this ancient binary template: Blessed are you who are poor, who hunger, who weep... Woe to you who are rich, full, laughing...

Many of us resist binaries. We try to stay open-minded by practicing "both/and" thinking, rather than getting stuck in "either/or." We don't want to be boxed in, and we certainly don't want to be judgmental. Our resistance to binaries has roots deep in our Anglican spirituality. Our institutional DNA is stamped by the Elizabethan Settlement back in 1559 that sought a *via media*, or middle way, between Rome and Geneva, between Roman Catholics and Calvinist Reformers. Episcopalians are known for accepting ambiguity as part of a life of faith. We are cautious about rigid "black and white" thinking, more comfortable than many of our fellow Christians with the metaphorical "grey."

Thanks be to God! There is room in our tradition for people to be honest about their doubts! The virtue of humility often accompanies ambiguity. Who are we, after all, to know the mind of God, much less proclaim God's judgment? Week by week at the Holy Eucharist, we proclaim the "mystery" of faith, not the objective, measurable "facts" of faith.

Yet... yet... amid our embrace of the "grey area," of ambiguity, of "both/and" thinking, of "mystery," the Holy Spirit presents us these binaries from our holy texts and invites us to wrestle with them, rather than dismiss them as being antiquated, unenlightened, or worse, an anathema to our preferences.

Perhaps the way to work with these contrasting images is to place them in the context of Epiphany light. The classic symbol of Epiphany is the star that guided the wise men from the East to the infant Jesus. Epiphany light comes from that mysterious star but also from the light that emanated from the stable, the Christ child himself, who is “Light from Light” and in whom “there is no darkness at all,” (1 John 1:5). We now begin our sixth week of soaking up Epiphany light, praying that the “eyes of [our] heart[s] might be enlightened,” so that we see a bit more like God sees (Ephesians 1:18).

As we’ve heard throughout this liturgical season, Epiphany means “manifestation” or “revelation.” The Church focuses on the Epiphany or revelation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, fully human, fully divine. And he is the Christ not just for his people, the Jews, but importantly God’s anointed one for the salvation and redemption of the whole world. In Jesus the Christ, God reveals to us God’s final word to creation generally, to humanity particularly, and that word is “Yes.” God’s word to us affirms our preciousness to God. God’s intractable “Yes” is expressed in:

- Christ’s Incarnation -- God becoming perfectly human, God-with-us: Emmanuel; who “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)
- Jesus’ Resurrection – the defeat of Death itself, as first fruit of a final resurrection in which we, too, will be raised: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)
- And in Jesus’ Ascension – in which Jesus, fully *human* and fully divine, sits at the right hand of God. Now that is metaphorical language... most of us don’t consciously reduce our image of the first person of the Trinity to an earthly monarch sitting high upon a throne! But the metaphor points to something mysterious and wonderful – that our redeemed human nature is worthy of being brought close to God, into holy space where angels and archangels and all the company of heaven cry out: “Glory!”

But let’s zero in on God’s Yes to us in Jesus’ resurrection. That’s what Paul focuses on in today’s epistle reading. And unlike the Ascension, the Gospels offer us eyewitness accounts of Jesus after the resurrection – walking through walls, showing his wounds and inviting us to touch them, breathing peace on his disciples, making breakfast for them on the beach.

God’s Yes to humanity -- even in light of our rejection of him, our enslavement to sin, our betrayal and lack of courage, our “perverse hearts” as Jeremiah exclaims – God’s *YES* to us, as we are, sinful and broken, is revealed in the Resurrection. And this *YES* overrides, supersedes, and puts into perspective all the other “no’s”...some of which we hear in our texts’ binaries today.

Karl Barth, arguably the most prominent Protestant theologian of the last century, eloquently and passionately guides us in interpreting the meaning of the penultimate “no’s” in light of God’s ultimate resurrection *YES*. He wrote:

“The final word [of God] is never that of warning, of judgment, of punishment, of a barrier erected, of a grave opened. We cannot speak of it without mentioning all these things. The Yes cannot be heard unless the No is also heard. But the No is said for the sake of the Yes and not for its own sake... therefore, the first and last word is Yes.” (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol 2, Part 2).

So the “no’s” and the woes matter. They have weight. It really isn’t a good idea to walk in the path of the way of sinners, or scoff, or put all our trust in mere mortals. God speaking through the Holy Scriptures guides us, instructs us, encourages us to “take delight in the law of the Lord,” to be “righteous,” or, to put in the language of our Baptismal Covenant, to “seek and serve Christ in all persons” and to “strive for justice and peace among all people.” But in the end, when we fall short (which we will), we can trust that God’s great resurrection *YES* will catch us, heal us, and restore us.

So, a question for you to ponder is: What difference does Jesus’ resurrection make in your life? How does God’s *YES* to you, to humanity, to creation, affect your day-to-day decisions, habits, patterns? If it isn’t very much, how would you like to be transformed and be energized by this resurrection hope?

Perhaps God’s *YES* reminds you that your body matters, other human bodies matter, the earth’s body matters. We won’t just escape to heaven one day after we die... instead, our bodies will be raised. Caring for bodies – yours, those of the poor, those of God’s critters – is a sign of your faith in resurrection hope.

Perhaps God’s *YES* reminds you as you see loved ones die, or as you face mortality, that our hope doesn’t lay in the latest medical innovation (as wonderful as they are!) but rather in God’s faithfulness, manifested in Jesus’ resurrection.

Perhaps God’s *YES* enables you to go into very difficult situations looking expectantly for the Risen Christ to meet you there.

Perhaps God’s *YES* encourages you to risk the disappointment of working on problems that won’t be “fixed” anytime soon – like the climate crisis, or the opioid epidemic, or generational poverty – and knowing that you are blessed for doing so, even though the world may not understand.

For in our baptism, all the “no’s” are penultimate, and God’s *YES* to us is final... and we are, day by day, little by little, participating in the “risen life of Christ our Savior,” emanating that Epiphany light that darkness cannot overcome. Thanks be to God!

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