



SUNNYVALE

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From the Pulpit

Sermon: "Yes!"

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ January 17, 2010

2 Corinthians 1:16-20

Isaiah 40:6-8

This week the eyes and heart of the world have turned to Haiti and to the devastation that has shattered this already terribly impoverished nation. It's hard to say which view of the situation is more heartbreaking: the wide-angle pictures of buildings crumbled down onto streets littered with bodies; or the focused shots where cameras peer into impossibly small crevices as rescuers try to pull a survivor out of the rubble. We struggle to wrap our compassion around the enormity of loss; to comprehend the scale of destruction, and we fail.

This is one of those times where it's easier to know what to *do* than to say. We give our money, we text in donations (in a fascinating use of technology that expedites compassion), we send rescuers from *around* the world, we ship desperately needed relief supplies and pray they will get through. But figuring out what to *say* about such a tragedy is harder. Leonard Pitts, a columnist for the Miami Herald wrote a poignant op-ed piece on Thursday. In it he says,

"Sometimes the Earth is cruel. Sometimes the rains fall and will not stop. Sometimes the skies turn barren and will not rain. Sometimes, the seas rise and smack the shoreline like a fist. Sometimes, the wind bullies the land. And sometimes, the land rattles and heaves and splits itself in two.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel. And always, when it is, we do the same thing. We dig ourselves out. We weep and mourn, we recover and memorialize the dead; we rebuild our homes. And we go on. This is the price of being human. And also, arguably, the noblest expression."

Contrast that with the comments of a certain TV evangelist who, on Wednesday, seemed to suggest that the Haiti earthquake was God's curse and judgment upon a nation that had made a pact with the devil a couple of centuries before.

Somewhere between a cruel Earth and a condemning God we look for hope, we wait in faith, we respond with compassion. And I'm so thankful that when we open the Scriptures we do not see there a divine "no comment" from a mute and indifferent universe. Nor are we left with a

divine, "No!" from an angry God. Our New Testament text celebrates that "in Jesus Christ it is always yes. For in Him *every one* of God's promises is a yes!"

Verse 20 in our passage today is one of those little-known but wonderful Bible texts: "In Jesus Christ *every one* of God's promises is a yes!" And I love that this grand articulation of God's favor and grace, of God's "thumbs up" and positive response to us, occurs *not* in the middle of some theological treatise on the providence of God or in some esoteric discussion on the proclivities of grace; but rather as the apostle Paul explains his change of itinerary. In other words, some of our best theology comes out of the mundane and everyday details of life. Some of our best discoveries about God come not by academic isolation from the world but through active involvement *in* it.

Here's the situation: previous to this passage the apostle Paul had communicated to the Corinthians that he had hoped to see them on his travels from Ephesus to Macedonia and then again on his way back to Judea (which is to say he's traveling from present-day Turkey to the south of Greece -- where Corinth is -- and then up farther north to Macedonia; and then back down again through Corinth and over to Israel; he planned to see them on both legs of the trip, coming and going).

However, Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church was at times strained and it had become all the more so between his telling them of his plans and the time when he writes these words. As a result, *out of pastoral concern* to not further exacerbate the situation, the apostle changes his travel plans. He decides *not* to stop by Corinth twice and further aggravate a difficult situation. But when the church in Corinth hears of it some folk there -- those who have been at the center of criticizing the apostle -- suggest that he's a flip flopper, a waver-er-- one who says one thing and then does another; and so they sought to undermine his credibility and character.

That's the context of our passage today: the apostle, in explaining his motivation for the change of plans, says that this is not a matter of vacillation or flightiness but simply trying to not make things worse. But *in the process* of his explanation the apostle expands the discussion beyond the particulars of the moment and beyond the details of his travels to speak about the faithfulness of God. He has the boldness to claim that his word is as faithful as the word of God. Now that's a pretty audacious claim but in making it Paul gives us this great theological proclamation about God's intents and purposes -- about God's disposition and attitude -- toward us; he writes: in Jesus Christ every one of God's promises is a yes!"

That's a great word, yes; don't you think? It's permission and approval; it's affirmation and support -- it's grace toward us who often live our lives under the fear of a no that will dismiss and disqualify us from God's love.

Think about those affirming yeses that you've heard in your life: those wonderful moments when you received what you asked for, when you were old enough to do something you wanted -- think of those words of affirmation that came to you from someone who mattered most. I remember 35 years ago last month standing with Nancy at the front of her Baptist Church and when the minister asked me, do you take Nancy as your wife... and to her, do you take Steve as your husband... and we answered yes! And a whole lot of life and love and laughter have unfolded from that yes!

We wander through life trying to find the right answers -- the answers we want to hear in the situations and circumstances that matter most to us. And we try to find answers we can trust. One of the free programs I downloaded onto my iPhone was a Magic 8 ball application. You just ask a question, give the phone a shake, and it comes up with an answer. But you know, are we really

going to trust our lives to something as capricious as an iPhone application? I mean, don't we really need a more trustworthy authority, something proven, reliable and established -- something like the *original* Magic 8 ball? You've got questions, the Magic 8 ball has answers:

Will Andy Aron ever ask me to sing a solo in church?: **Outlook not so good**

Is it going to rain this week?: **Yes**

Am I *ever* going to eat brussel sprouts?: **My reply is no**

Is this a great church to be a part of?: **Signs point to yes!**

Signs point to yes. That's encouraging. But the Bible's answer is even stronger than that: it says, "In Jesus Christ *every one* of God's promises is yes!" Do you wonder if you are loved? Do you worry if you can be forgiven? Do you ask if God has a purpose and plan for your life? Do you wonder if there is hope in the midst of the world's catastrophes, help in our country's challenges, and healing in your personal crises? In Jesus Christ every one of God's promises is yes!

But here's the thing -- and we can't miss this about the life of faith -- every yes from God looks for and expects a *responding* yes from us. God's promises to us are yes in Jesus; but we *receive* and benefit from those promises as we say yes to God. In fact the life of faith could well be described as our response of yes to God's initial great yes in our lives.

What that response of yes on our part might look like is going to be as different as we are from one another. But clearly a part of that response -- having heard the great and gracious affirming yes of God -- part of that response is to turn and say yes to the world. And that's what we have done here in our neighborhood as we've collected canned goods for the hungry; that's what we've done here in our community as we've given to help house homeless families and keep them together through Family Supportive Housing-- and that's what we're doing as we give toward Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to assist those in need in Haiti.

It's *also* what we're doing in our Step Beyond program that starts next week and which you can still sign up for. A lot of us when we start the New Year identify things we want to quit and stop and say no to. *And...* we also have those things that we want to begin and start and say yes to. Step Beyond is a season of discipleship that allows us, as a community in fellowship with one another, to begin to make real and practical -- and personal to ourselves -- a response of yes to God great yes in our lives.

Friends, in Jesus Christ every one of God's promises are yes! I'm challenging you on this day, in this service -- and for this season that stretches out before us -- to say yes to God and to the life of discipleship.

Last question for the Magic 8 Ball: Are we going to be a church that gives a strong "Yes!" to God's promise of grace and in this New Year live out lives of faith and faithfulness?: **It is Certain!**