

“Yes, And”

Acts 16:16-34

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There are people who prefer to say ‘Yes,’ and there are people who prefer to say ‘No.’ Those who say ‘Yes’ are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say ‘No’ are rewarded by the safety they attain.

-Keith Johnstone, *Improv: Improvisation in the Theatre*, p. 92

Most of the Christian life is faithful preparation for an unknown test.

-Rev. Dr. Sam Wells

Some time ago I had one of those “drive-way moments” listening to NPR. The story was about a classical guitarist in concert in the middle of playing a Bach piece, when someone’s phone went off with the loud ringtone of “Oh Susanna.” Immediately, the entire audience was miffed, everyone turning, looking, whispering, as the embarrassed audience member tried frantically to find his or her phone to silence it. Instead of calling out the rude and unthinking audience member, the guitarist, with only a moment’s hesitation, transitioned into playing “Oh Susanna” along with the phone ringtone, in the same baroque style of Bach, and continued to play after the phone was silenced, as he transitioned back into his Bach piece. Many audience members thought it was all planned.

What do we do when confronted by the unexpected? The unknown? How do we respond? Do we call it out and confront it? Fight it? Try to shut it down or perhaps we ourselves shut down with anxiety or ignore it or deny it exists – what

improvisational theater calls, “blocking”? Or do we respond with improv’s “Yes, And”? What’s called “accepting”? “Yes” means to agree and accept, while “And” means to add onto it, go with it, and play with it, even creatively transforming it, which is what the guitarist did.

My friend, Sam Wells, the Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London, says “Most of the Christian life is about faithful preparation for an unknown test” (*Improvisation*, p.80). We are to learn, to inhabit our story, our script, so well that it becomes second-nature to us. At the same time, we are learning to trust God and trust each other, to collaborate and cooperate, so that when the unknown comes, when cancer shows up, climate change, Covid, immigration crises, and on and on, we respond with “Yes, And” instead of “No, But.”

Acts 16 is a “Yes, And” story, a story of two people who knew the improvisational power of the gospel. It is a story in three acts.

Act One: Paul and Silas meet their own personal psychic. They are in Phillipi when this enslaved girl starts following them around shrieking at them, pointing at them; she knows who they are, and she screams to the town who they are. Like most forms of madness or fundamentalism, she has a firm grasp on a single strand of truth and does it to death. Paul is not amused; in a personal favorite of mine, verse 18, says, “But Paul is very much annoyed ...” Paul improvises. He turns on his heels and shouts, “Come out of her!” And it does. She is set free from the monotone voice and power of the owners who enslave her, and she is given her true voice in Christ.

Act Two: Paul and Silas meet the slave-owners. There were some men who were under the impression that they owned her, and they profited from her possession. Now that she is free, they will lose money and they are not happy, so

being men of money and influence, they get Paul and Silas before the authorities, but they don't talk about money and their slave-girl, they talk patriotism. They take out the flag and start waving it, "These men who are outside agitators are Jews who are threatening our community's values and our morals." Well, that is all the crowd needs to hear. And the politicians are not stupid; they see the opportunity to stand for God and country, so they join in and have Paul and Silas beaten and then have them thrown into the innermost cell of the local prison.

The innermost cell means that there was a ring of outer cells, perhaps with a small window looking outward. But in the center, surrounded by all the other cells was a dark, dank, dungeon. No fresh air, no light. Into that dark foreboding unknown, Paul and Silas are thrown and to add to their torture, their feet are placed in stocks so they can't move around. Bleeding, broken bones, bruised Paul and Silas can only await tomorrow which promises more of the same, if not worse.

What do we do when facing the dark unknown?

"You have cancer" are three of the most dreaded words one can hear. Comedian George Carlin used to say, "We're all pre-cancerous," which is not far from the truth. Some of the numbers I've read, say that perhaps 40% of people in the United States currently have or will have some form of cancer. Nevertheless, it is shocking when we hear the words applied to ourselves. When my urologist confirmed Dr. Eric's suspicion late last fall, Jane and I were stunned. When Dr. Mary Hebert, our outstanding radiation oncologist here at the Cancer Center at NMC, said, "The prostate cancer you have is highly aggressive," Jane and I walked to the car without saying a word. We were literally dumbfounded.

As a quick aside, let me mention that Dr. Eric had been watching my lab work like a hawk, which meant that changes in my PSA's were caught early on. To

mix bird metaphors, it was his eagle-eye that caught it, otherwise, I would not have had any clue that anything was wrong until this “highly aggressive” form of prostate cancer was much further advanced.

Cancer changes your life, and it changes everyone around you, too. Writer Susan Sontag said, “Cancer is a disease that does not knock before entering.” W.H. Auden calls it the “hidden assassin.”

It was interesting to me that so much of the literature on cancer uses the language of violence in dealing with it. We “battle” cancer, in 1971 Pres. Nixon “declared war on cancer.” We fight it, destroy it, kick its butt. Some books urge us to put together a Cancer Battle Plan and radiation therapy and chemo are described as smart bombs, and precision guided munitions.

Now, I’m highly aware that that the language of war works for some people, but it does not work for me. After sixty-six years in church, fifty-four years of being a baptized Christian, forty-three years of being a pastor, and in two weeks, thirty-four years here – after all these years of studying, praying, reading, writing, preaching, singing, serving, and worshiping the God we know in Jesus Christ, when facing the unknown, facing cancer, I need a different way of thinking and speaking and living besides declaring war. I want theological and biblical ways of thinking and speaking. I want ways that are true for who I believe God is and who I am.

A friend of mine said to me this week, if you don’t fight the cancer, what do you do, give up?”

No, not at all. In an interview in the July issue of the AARP magazine, actor Jeff Bridges was interviewed about his own recent journey with cancer. Bridges

practices Zen Buddhism and I know from my own preaching and lecturing at All Saints by the Sea Episcopal Church in his hometown of Santa Barbara, CA, that he is an occasional Episcopalian. Bridges said as an actor and a musician, he learned to “jam with this situation.” He went on to say this is not casual. He had to confront the possibility of death. In what may have been his darkest moment, he said he sought to engage death instead of fearing it, and he worked on accepting his own death. He said his doctor told him to fight it, but he said, “I couldn’t understand how you’d fight it. So, I fought by “surrendering, which is not the same as giving up.” He went on, “Love was magnified for me during this time. Not only from the people around me but also the love in my own heart for them.”

In my own experience, I can testify to the extraordinary love I experienced from the health-care workers – from the doctors to the nurses and technicians. The nurses and technicians at the Nacogdoches Medical Center Cancer Center are remarkable in their love and care for patients like me, but most especially for patients in far worse condition. I’m still working on what all this means, but I deeply believe that all healing happens in the midst of love and relationships. Part of this is why it is so important to find ways to connect and reconnect with one another during illnesses – prayer cards, notes, texts, phone calls, and in-the-flesh-face-to-face visits.

Furthermore, there is a long and ancient tradition in Christianity that speaks of surrendering instead of fighting. You get some of that in the poem in your insert this morning, “For a Friend on the Arrival of Illness” by John O’Donohue, a former Catholic priest. The great French Catholic Charles De Foucauld, who died in 1916 wrote, “Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all.”

Surrendering is accepting, a kind of, “Yes, And.” You accept the cancer, be real about it, and you engage it, but you also are looking for ways to respond creatively, imaginatively, out of the depths of faith. And we’re able to do that because of the gospel.

Act Three: Paul and Silas in the midnight hour. It was, says Luke, about the midnight hour. I wonder if Wilson Pickett read this? In the midnight hour, Paul and Silas improvise and start praying and singing to God and to one another and to anyone else who might listen. One of the great duets in history sounding nothing like Pavarotti and Domingo, not Tony Bennett and Michael Buble, but perhaps more like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. Just as they start singing, Paul spits a loose tooth out on the ground. But Luke says all the prisoners were listening to them. The word Luke uses is the word for the most attentive, enraptured kind of listening. The kind of listening that happens when you lean forward in your seat, head raised, eyes closed so you won’t miss a note or a word. Out of the darkness of the innermost cell there arose singing which echoed throughout the rest of the prison. They sang with pain and passion; they sang with power and praise. It rang off the walls and began to shake the foundations.

Sometimes it is not time to sing. Sometimes we must wait. Sometimes there is silence. The pain is too fresh; we are still in shock. But we do not have to wait until the break of a new day to sing. We can’t wait that long to improvise the gospel. There is a time, sometime between the first hurt and the final healing, sometime after the lights go out and before the light of morning, about the midnight hour, when the people of God lift their heads and sing.

We take what God gives us or, like Paul and Silas here, we take what the powers-that-be give us, or we take what this old world gives us, yet we know we

are not alone. God present in the Holy Spirit and there is a brother or sister nearby with whom we improvise and join our voices in singing. We sing to one another, and we sing to God. And we sing to let the authorities know that they don't own us! We sing that we belong to God!

I wonder what Paul and Silas were actually singing in that hole? I bet it wasn't "Every Day with Jesus is Sweeter Than the Day Before." But if they were singing a Psalm, which they probably were, I bet they were singing Psalm 139, "Even the darkness is not dark with You. The night with You is brighter than day." Had they known it, they might have sung Luther's great hymn, "The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure for lo, his doom is sure. One little word will fell him." Or maybe this, "Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come. Tis grace that hath brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home."

With that there begins a rumble and a tremble and something shaking all around. "There's a whole lot of shaking going on." The floors heave, the chains and stocks fall off and when the dust settles, a door is standing open. In the midst of darkness, we worship the Almighty and we look, and a door has opened. When we worship God, God shakes the foundations of every place that holds people down in prison, in chains. Who knows what jail is being shaken every time we sing right here?! Who knows what unknown is being faced with open eyes and hearts full of faith, when we join together and sing?! Who knows what door is opened?

Many times, during my so-far brief sojourn in "Cancer-World" I have found myself singing full-throated the hymns during our Sunday morning worship. My voice catches, and my eyes tear up, and I sing! Or I've been out on the porch listening to my playlists of music and I cry my way through the various hymns.

Paul and Silas knew from their life-long formation in the Jewish faith, that when facing the dark unknown you respond with prayer and singing because they knew we are never alone in the dark.

So, let me quickly ask, how do you respond when facing the unknown? What resources are in your life? What we do here is forming us, so we have the resources of the Living God.

Therefore, we don't have to "block" and shutdown saying, "No, But." We don't have to build walls, put up razor wire, and get our guns.

An improvisational "Yes" says, I look the unknown square in the face, but I'm not alone. God is with us. God's people are with me caring for me, with me, and loving me.

We surrender, we accept, we say "Yes." At the same time, we also know that there are some things that we do not merely accept. We don't accept injustice and war and then stop. We don't just receive cancer and leave it at that. We also say, "And."

To add "And," frees us up from the paralysis of fear that tends to dominant when facing the unknown. It is a reminder that what happens is not up to us. It is not up to the church. The future is not ours to control or manipulate. Chill. The future is in God's hands, therefore, when we trust God with the future then we can think beyond even the worst thing. When we trust God with the future the threatening power of the worst thing is alleviated.

The key is the word "And." This small word is significant. It indicates that the sentence is not yet finished. The story is not yet over. There is more to come, even when evil has done its worst. If we can get to the place where we face up to

the threat, stare it in the face, and say, “Yes, And...” then we have gone a long way toward disarming the threat. “Yes, And” is a way of saying, “What’s next?”

The gospel is about the revolutionary power of the community of God who can face the unknown thing, even the worst thing and say, “Yes, And.” When faced with the overwhelming power of Pharaoh’s army bearing down on them and with their backs up against the Red Sea, the people of Israel said, “Yes, And.” “Yes, Pharaoh is coming. *And* God is still at work.” Yes, And ... the Red Sea parted.

Israel sent 12 spies into the Promised Land and 10 came back saying they couldn’t go in because their worst fears were realized: the land was full of giants. But Caleb and Joshua said, “Yes, And.” Young David went up against the giant Goliath because he said, “Yes, And.” When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the fiery furnace they said, “Yes, And.” When Daniel came to face to face with the lion’s den, he said, “Yes, And.”

When Jesus faced death, even death on a cross, he could do so because he trusted in the “Yes, And” of the living God. He believed that death was not the end of the story; that the worst the Principalities and Powers could do was not the end of what God had planned. He trusted that God has the last word. God has a “what’s next?” So even the “Yes” of surrendering to death on the cross was a prelude to “And ... God resurrected him.”

We are able to say, “Yes, And” when we link our lives with the resurrected life of Jesus Christ. Our power to say “Yes, And” comes from him. Our ability to face fear comes from being able to say, “Yes, And.”

When Dr. Hebert told Jane and me earlier this week that the tests came back with the cancer “undetectable,” we knew that a door was opened, and we are asking, “What’s next?”

Therefore, we can ask “What’s next Austin Heights?” because we know the “Yes, And” of the Living God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.