

Saying No in Order to Say Yes (Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16)
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The First Sunday in Lent (Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/saying-no-in-order-to-say-yes

In this season of Lent, we will explore passages from the Book of Psalms, a part of the Bible we seldom consider. It's known as a book of poems, or lyrics to worship songs. In Ephesians 5:19 we're told to *speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*. In other words, we are to soak ourselves in the words of Scripture so those words and ideas spill over in everyday language with one another. Normally on this weekend, we would focus on Jesus spending 40 days and 40 nights as a spiritual retreat and testing. Today, however, let's consider that experience through the lens of the psalms.

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 (The New Century Version)

*“Those who go to God Most High for safety
will be protected by the Almighty.
I will say to the Lord, “You are my place of safety and protection.
You are my God and I trust you.”
The Lord is your protection;
you have made God Most High your place of safety.
Nothing bad will happen to you;
no disaster will come to your home.
He has put his angels in charge of you
to watch over you wherever you go.
They will catch you in their hands
so that you will not hit your foot on a rock.
You will walk on lions and cobras;
you will step on strong lions and snakes.
The Lord says, “Whoever loves me, I will save.
I will protect those who know me.
They will call to me, and I will answer them.
I will be with them in trouble;
I will rescue them and honor them.
I will give them a long, full life,
and they will see how I can save.”*

A few years ago, two priests who were friends of mine at our neighborhood Catholic Church decided that they would help their church raise money for the renovation of the Catholic community center they were trying to reenergize. Their goal was to raise \$100,000 in cash so the church could jumpstart its plan to develop their athletic fields. They tossed around the usual ideas for fund-raising and came up with something totally unexpected: They decided that

each of them would climb into a large open-air wooden box made of plywood attached to the top of a 20' utility pole and they would not come down until they had each raised \$50,000. Not only that, but the first one to reach their goal would shave the head of the other.

They quickly became known in the neighborhood as "Two priests on a pole" ... (Sounds like something you might order in the food court of a mall in the Amazon).

I went over to visit my two comrades in ministry to give them some encouragement. To be honest, they were a pitiful sight. Father Jimmy, the younger of the two priests, had a bandana on his head and some cool shades because of the bright sunshine. Father Dennis, the senior Padre, looked like he had spent about a week in a deer blind. Both of them looked pretty gamey.

I went over one morning when there weren't many people there and Father Dennis invited me to join him in his aerie perch to talk. I asked him what it was like to maintain his vigil from inside a plywood box precariously attached to a tall utility pole. He said there were plenty of folks who stopped by to give money and to offer their encouragement. Television news crews came by occasionally to help them spread the story of their project. Folks from all over the city heard about their efforts and came by to wave or honk at them. While people came by at all times of the day and night, he told me he actually had a lot of time for prayer and reading. It was like a spiritual retreat elevated above the ground. The hard part, he said, was the middle part of the week after they had been up there for 3 or 4 days.

What kind of state of mind would you be in after a few days of that kind of craziness? To be honest, I worried about them. I worried they would be a little goofy after a while. I worried they might have an out of the body experience or that they might hallucinate or start hearing voices.

I tried this week to think what it must have been like to spend day after day and night after night in the seclusion of the wilderness. Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights fasting in preparation for the journey of his calling. True, during his time of testing, there weren't cars driving by and honking and there weren't people of all kinds standing at the base of his box talking with him out of curiosity. It was a time of severe isolation and testing that made him take a long look at the inward things of his life. It was a time when he was forced to see what he was made of and how he might respond when the true tests of his calling came.

And the Bible tells us that it was during this time that Jesus was tempted.

Maybe testing is the way of all things. Almost any tough situation can be a test of sorts. Perhaps it comes in the form of a failure that sets us back in life. Maybe you lose a job or a friend or a significant relationship. Maybe it comes in the form of a death or a grief experience where a piece of you is cut off and you are wounded and broken. Maybe you've spent a long day or night waiting in a hospital while doctors hold your loved one's life in their hands in some medical emergency. Know that in those moments, you are experiencing something of what Jesus experienced in that desert.

At the core of this experience, we see Jesus doing all that was in him to deny himself as a spiritual exercise. In this story, we see Jesus denying himself of what he had in abundance in order to discover just how much he had in reserve. This is an austere image of the one who was vitally connected to all the rich resources of the entire creation. This is a stark image of one who was on a journey. Jesus followed the voice that beckoned him to the wilderness where there were no comforts and no amenities to make life easier.

Jesus did what persons of faith have always been drawn to do ... to find a way to strip away all the distractions so that even the quietest prompting of the Spirit can be heard. I suppose all of us have heard the siren's call at one time or another to spend more time in quietness and self-denial.

The problem comes whenever we try to shut down the noise that fills our souls. Whenever we try to create an inner silence, we become aware of the cacophony of sounds that drown out the silence. It's a noise that's both within and without.

In this season of Lent, we are listening closely to the ancient poet, the writer of a collection of poems we know as the Psalms. In order to listen closely, I am matching our ancient poem with a poem of our time so they might dialogue together for a deeper meaning.

The Journey

Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen

branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver, *Dream Work*, New York: Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 1986

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that Lent is “forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. (It’s) forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.”

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