

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
June 18, 2017

Yes

Are any of you fans of the old British television comedy series called, *The Vicar of Dibley*? If you have never seen it you should treat yourself, as it is a very funny and quite tender series of stories about people and church that is set in a tiny village in rural England, where at a time when the ordination of women to the priesthood was very new, their Bishop had sent them a quirky woman to be their Vicar. Each of the characters who are members of her church is precious in his or her own way, but my favorite was a member of the vestry named Jim, who had a stammer, but only when asked a yes-no question. He would often say no, no, no, no, no, no...Yes! when he was trying to answer in the affirmative. After I became a fan of the show, and of Jim in particular, I found myself with all the other characters hanging on Jim's every *No*, just to see how many he could get out before the *Yes*, or if maybe just this one time, he really meant *No*. On its surface it sounds silly, but there was always something appealing about Jim holding everyone in suspense, or of stretching out the time allotted to make up his mind, as if he represented that internal argument we all have with ourselves—before we say out loud what we think, how we feel, or what we will commit to, knowing deep down that we like to keep our options open; that we like to be able—if need be—to change our minds.

Our readings today brought Jim to mind because they are stories of no and yes. First, we have the story of Abraham and Sarah, set *after* Abraham said yes to God and they had left their home for an unknown destination, but *before* they began to produce the offspring that would become generations as numerous as the stars. They are camping somewhere along their journey to Canaan, and Abraham is sitting at the

entrance of his tent in the heat of the day when the Lord appears, and right behind him three visitors. Abraham and Sarah scurry and fuss and treat them like royalty, offering water for washing and food for refreshment—cakes and bread and cheese and a newly prepared tender calf just brought in from the herd. The visitors bring nothing but some good news with them—that Sarah is soon to conceive a son. And when Sarah is called out of the tent to hear this good news, what does she do? She laughs—*no, no, no*, that is not possible, she says to herself—and it is not clear if she is talking about having a baby or making one. A call to motherhood at her advanced age made her crack up, and she was clearly not *all in* with this plan. What got Sarah from her *no, no, no*, to *yes*? Was it fear, or hope, or eventually just the wonder of feeling a child move in the barren womb of her old age?

And then we move to Matthew, where Jesus calls the disciples and hands out a job description of what he is calling them for. Jesus says the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few, so he calls them, each by name. Those original twelve came from very ordinary lives as farmers and fishermen, with a tax collector thrown in just to keep it interesting, and yet they were being called to an extraordinary task, and given authority by Jesus to cast out unclean spirits, to cure every disease and every sickness and to raise the dead, and *oh yes*—to be sheep among wolves, and possibly to be persecuted and flogged by the authorities. *No, no, no*, we can hear them saying to themselves; this is more than I bargained for. I don't mind following Jesus around, because he is amazing and is surely from God, but *no, no, no. Not hardly. Not now. Not me*. What got the disciples to *yes*?

Have you ever been in a place like the disciples, or like Abraham and Sarah, where God is trying to ask something, or do something with your life? Sometimes those

moments in time are not so clear until we look back on them. When I was very young and working my way through college, majoring in politics and philosophy, I was sure I was going to be a lawyer, because lawyers are fixers, or so I thought at the time, and I am by nature a fixer. Instead I found myself working for my father, traveling around four states and selling sporting goods. This was a great job for a twenty-something—offering lots of travel and more money than I needed, but something was calling me to be more useful to the world. It is not that running shoes and tennis rackets are not useful—it's more that I was infected with a restlessness that would not go away. Be a doctor, it said. *No, no, no*, I said. Too hard, too expensive, too crazy. So, I went back to college for two years to take enough science courses just to apply to medical school, and for some inexplicable reason they let me in. The two classroom years were a struggle, and almost did me in—*no, no, no*, you will never make it; then by the third year, the first time I was at the bedside of a patient, I knew why I was there. I was not churched at the time, nor did I have the vocabulary at the time to give God the credit for this *yes* in my life, but becoming a family doctor in a small town became a rich and meaningful choice, and I can say that for years, on most days, I looked forward to getting up and going to work in the morning.

After several years which were crowded with work, children, soccer games, and school plays, my *yes* began to fade, and the restlessness came back. I had followed my children back into church, but instead of being a warm and nurturing greenhouse for me to rest and grow my relationship with God, it became another long and winding road, which took me to see that healing of mind and body through medicine was an empty task if the spirit stayed broken and lost. I began to hear a call of a different kind—something more complicated—drawing me to end-of-life care *at the same time* that I

was drawn to ordained ministry. I wrestled with these competing interests until I understood that I was to do both—and this lightning bolt knocked me down right off my life. Of course, there were plenty of *no*'s to follow. Become a priest? *No*, I already have a profession. *No*, I would not be any good at it. *No*, I can't stop what I am doing and go to seminary. *No*, the church will never go for this. *No*, that is just crazy, or worse, people will think *I* am crazy (and they would be right). And then eventually OK, *yes*, if you insist. *No, no, no, no, yes*. And then, again three years ago—give up all those years of training and experience in medicine to work in the church full time? Surely not. *No, no, no, no—yes*.

Every call from God is not to ordained ministry, or to a change in jobs, or place to live, but *everyone* is called by God in some way, to be laborers in the harvest, over and over. It may be a whisper, that we need to quiet down to hear; it may be a circumstance that smacks us down, calling for a new orientation to our lives, or it may be just a restlessness that gets us asking, “What now?” or “How am I being asked to offer my gifts?” It may be a call to something that seems small but has a large *heroic* impact—volunteering to help with Vacation Bible School comes to mind—to cook some burgers or bake some cookies, or wash some dishes, to guide children through making something with their own hands, or showing them experiments that offer them some new wonder at their world. Or even to become Captain Shield or Sargent Sunshine to teach them about Jesus. Or it may be a call that at first seems too big for us, something for which we feel ill prepared—like putting our lives on hold to care for a loved one, or to take on the leadership of a new ministry serving others at church or in the community. It may be a call to mend a relationship, or to offer forgiveness in a place where we never thought we could. In whatever way that we are called to wake up, to rise up, to do

something that builds God's kingdom, it is easy to find ourselves saying, *no, no, no, no. Not me, not now*, we say as we laugh like Sarah and think, *not this. I'm not ready. I'm too busy. I'm too old. It's too late. I'm too young. I'm not qualified. I'm not worthy of the task. I have other responsibilities. I have better things to do. No, no, no, no.*

So how do we go from *no* to *yes*—*yes* to that thing the Holy Spirit is stirring up in us, making us restless and pushing us out from our comfort zones to places of vulnerability, where we find ourselves sheep in the midst of wolves? How do we shift our perspective to see that a plentiful harvest *is* the Good News, and that our loving God has already given us every gift we need to do all that we are called to do to become his laborers—to be all that we were created to be—to open our eyes to a journey that has already been prepared for us with the living bread come down from heaven, the water springing from the rock, and our God beside us, making a way out of no way?

Sometimes the *yes* comes because we hit a wall and see no other choice. Sometimes we are pushed by circumstances, or pulled by fellow travelers on the way. *No, no, no, no, yes.* And sometimes we are meant to be that *yes* for someone else who might be struggling to find the path of healing, forgiveness and grace: *yes*, I am here for you; *yes*, the Good News of Jesus Christ is real, and *yes*, being blessed by a life in Christ has changed me for the good, and brought me true joy.

Sometimes getting to *yes* is as simple as letting go of *no*, and finding that each and every *yes*—however long it takes to get there—opens us to a life of abundance and blessing beyond anything we could have asked or imagined. So, if you feel called to follow your *yes*, I recommend that you do some deep theological research by watching some old *Vicar of Dibley* reruns, and meet old Jim if you don't know him already. Then pay attention when that restless call of God is circling around your life, and even if you

hear yourself saying no, no, no, no, take a deep breath, and if it helps, laugh all the way to *yes*. AMEN