

Sermon: Saying “Yes” to a Fierce and Mysterious God

Year B, Proper 23

[Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31](#)

Offered October 11, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. (Psalm 23:6). Do you recognize that? I bet there are more than a few of you who know you’ve heard it, but have trouble placing it, because you’re not hearing the bit that leads into it. *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.* (Psalm 23:1). Now do you recognize it? Yeah. It’s the 23rd Psalm. A psalm we often hear at funerals, although I try to include it at other times because it’s so hopeful and comforting.

When Jesus hung on the cross, dying in pain, alone, betrayed by those closest to him, publicly ridiculed by those to whom he was offering salvation, he didn’t pray the 23rd Psalm with its hope and comfort. He prayed the 22nd. *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46).

You are here on a beautiful October morning of a long holiday weekend. The leaves are in spectacular color. You could be anywhere, driving up a scenic route, on your porch having coffee, worshipping at the chapel of a queen sized quilted pillow top with fresh sheets. Some of you have flown to get here. But whatever your specific reason for being here is, at some point, in some way, you said, “Yes” to our fierce and mysterious God.

You give that “yes” and something begins to shift. You may have said that “yes” so long ago when you were a child that you don’t know any other life. But once that “yes” is given, you’re committed to loving God and treating others as you would be treated. It’s appallingly easy to say and appallingly difficult to do.

Take a minute and think what a world would be like that loved God and treated others as you would be treated. I’m not saying we have to love the same church or the same rituals or read from the same book. What would it be like if we all loved something so much bigger than ourselves? What would it be like if we treated others as we would be treated? Sit there for a minute in silence and imagine. Imagine the big issues, war and gun violence and opioid addiction and climate change and pipelines and income inequality and racism and ... the list is endless. Think of those. And then think of all the little daily issues, getting cutoff in traffic, people who write in library books, coworkers who complain about the coffee. Think about the interaction that annoyed you the most in the past week — with your kid, your spouse, the bank teller, your minister. What would the world be like if we all loved God and treated others as we would be treated?

[Pause]

Jesus didn’t ask us to live in that world. He did as us to live *into* that world. He did ask us to live *in order to bring* that world into being. But he asked us to live in this world, the real world. He asked us to live in the world with tax collectors, who were hated more back then than drug dealers are today. He asked us to live fully and authentically in this world.

Yes, there’s a need to change the world as it is. But the place we have to start is with curiosity about how the world is and why it is that way. Think about the story from Mark today. The rich man comes up to him and says, “I’m in. What do I have to do?” “Keep the commandments.”

Jesus says. “Done. Cross that off the list. Been doing that since I was a kid.” “OK, then give all your money away to the poor and follow me.” The man leaves in grief.

Think for a second. Because anyone who’s here on a beautiful Sunday morning of a long weekend, knows another story Jesus told. There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said, “Give me my inheritance now.” And off he goes and spends that in high living. That prodigal son certainly gave all his money away, but that story didn’t end up in the place this story ends.

Jesus tells the rich man to keep the commandments: no murder, no adultery, not stealing, no false witness, no defrauding, honor the parents. There is no way to keep those commandments and not be curious about the world. Genuine openness to those commandments leads you to other people and seeing what you can do to help them. You cannot say “yes” to a fierce and mysterious God and not begin to explore the mystery.

The Outreach committee asked Dennie Townsend, Brookline’s Welfare officer what else the Food Pantry needed. They were all set. There were some families who needed back to school clothes and shoes, but food wise, they were pretty good for now. “We can do something about the shoes and clothes.” Outreach said, and they bought a bunch of gift cards to let families solve that problem on their own. Dennie wanted me to let everyone know that everyone really appreciated the gift cards.

One of the members of AA approached me before the meeting. As part of their program they reflect on how well they’re serving the community and how they might reach more folks. They asked me to think about if there was anything we could think of that they could do better. I said I would think on it, but asked them to do the same for the church.

That same curiosity, however, can lead to some dark, dead ends. The same person from AA worried about opiod overdoses. “Heroin’s only \$3. There’s something wrong when tips from your paper route are enough to kill you.” But AA needs to stay focused on alcohol if they are to offer real help to their group.

When we step into the real world curiosity can lead us into searing and broken places. We can no longer fail to notice the people who are being scapegoated for problems we all have. We look at cancer and see someone drawing the losing ticket in the genetic lottery. We look at good parents with pretty rotten kids, or decent kids with pretty rotten parents and we our hearts go out to them for having been dealt such a crummy hand. We make hundreds of decisions each day, some of them we know are probably pretty lousy, but generally it comes out ok. And yet we see a friend or a family member make one, tiny, bad call and their lives are torn apart.

Job is sitting in one of those places. He has done nothing wrong and he knows he has done nothing wrong. He has said “yes” to God and he has been abandoned by God. He wants to take God to court. The translations of Job don’t give a sense of how much legal terminology he’s using. If he could only find a judge who wouldn’t be swayed by God’s power and influence. If only God would explain things to him, hear his complaint. And yet there is Job being crushed by the silence coming from the God whom Job refuses to abandon or curse.

So if you have said “yes” to our fierce and mysterious God and you are sitting in a dark and broken place, you are not a second class Christian. I know there are plenty of Christians who talk about the rainbows and kitten and unicorns that they experience now that they have said “yes”. I know there are plenty of Christians who talk about experiencing God in their life every

day, sometimes in ways I find hard to believe. I have no doubt there are people who may try to get you to see the bright side.

You need to know that you are sitting in a holy place. You are sitting where Jesus sat. You have been given a hard gift, made all the harder because your faith in God only makes God's absence more searing. But you are not sitting there alone, there are others. They too are weeping and mourning. They too are waiting for the light of the Promised Day, when God will speak to all through all Creation. We are all waiting in the darkness until we can witness real life in this world by saying, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* (Psalm 23:6)