

SERMON TITLE: “A Strange and Beautiful ‘Yes’”

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 1:12–2:4

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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INTRODUCTION

Last week James poked a bit of fun at philosophers (I thought about finding a picture of a philosopher and sticking James’s head on there, but philosophers don’t have nearly as interesting pictures as the Terminator!). To be honest, though, the ridicule is sometimes deserved.

Philosophers can seem like a bit of an alien species at times with their abstract ideas, fancy logical proofs, and their heads in the clouds. I read a lot of academic philosophy during my university days, and sometimes I would finish an entire paper and not have a single clue how these ideas might be applied to actual life. I like philosophy, but I understand why people criticize it too!

Speaking of philosophy, Russell Berg and I attended a lecture at the University of Victoria on Monday night by one of my former professors from Regent College. The topic was, of all things, philosophy—specifically, about the limits of philosophy. Philosophy is always concerned about what *is*—what are the unchanging principles and descriptions of how reality works. It looks for timeless truth, above the messy, complicated details of history.

James threw out some big words from the ancient Greek world—Epicureans and Stoics. Well, today I’m going to give you a couple more, both from around 500 years before Christ: Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus was a philosopher who argued that reality simply *is* change. He is famous for saying that “you cannot step twice into the same river.” The river is always changing.

Parmenides, on the other hand, argued that reality is one and does not change, that no matter what we experience, what is *really* real—in the unseen realm of pure reason—cannot and does not change. Our experiences are untrustworthy and fleeting. We *experience* change, but our experience is just a shadow of the ultimate truth.

Well, philosophers ever since these two have been arguing about this issue (and they don’t look like resolving the matter anytime soon!).

But whatever we think about the question, we know that our experience of life involves a lot of change. Our lives are always changing—people come in and out of our lives, we live in various places, we do different things—and as we do, we change too.

We don’t look at things the same way when we’re 45 as we did when we were 15. We ask different questions and find different kinds of answers satisfying. How I looked at

the issue of divorce, for example, looked different when I was 15 and didn't know much about, well *anything*, than it does in my thirties when I know many people who have been through and have sat in anguished conversations about those it affects.

I ask different questions now and the answers aren't always as easy as they seemed earlier on. I experience certain longings more personally. Things affect me differently. This is true for all of us. Life changes, and we adapt.

So how do we think about truth or about how to follow God in a world that is always changing, and we along with it?

Soren Kierkegaard (a philosopher!) once had this to say about our experience of life:

WE LIVE OUR LIVES FORWARD, BUT UNDERSTAND THEM BACKWARDS.

There is a lot of wisdom in this quote—and, as we'll see, it's an important principle in learning how to live with God's promises.

CORINTHIAN CONTEXT

As James mentioned last week, we are embarking on a journey through 2 Corinthians for our sermon series.

This letter is written by the Apostle Paul—a man very familiar with change. He had devoted his earlier years to persecuting the first Christians because they were departing from the *universal truths of the Jewish Law*! God turned him around on the road to Damascus and he became the greatest missionary in the church's history.

The people and the city he was writing too were also familiar with change. Corinth was a 4000 year-old city by the time Paul arrived there! It had been conquered and destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC and lay in ruins for over a century. It was refounded in 44 BC as a colony for retired veterans of the Roman legion. Corinth was a city much like a ours—a port city that was a hub of economic activity, sexually permissive, a lot of upwardly mobile people, and lots of ethnic, and religious diversity.

Our text this morning also deals with change. Throughout the first chapter of the book you get the sense that Paul is on the defensive against people who don't trust his authority, who are suspicious at his change in travel plans. Paul had visited them before, had written a nasty letter to them. There were hurt feelings and mistrust.

So into this context of change and changing minds and changing opinions, Paul writes these words:

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy

and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

I like to think of myself as somewhat of a writer—and writers are suckers for a memorable phrase. Sometimes we just come across a set of words that are put together in a way that just makes us go, “Wow! That’s beautiful.” We like to read these phrases and (even more, we like to come up with them!). And this passage has a truly memorable phrase.

FOR ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD FIND THEIR YES IN HIM.

Of course, there are many phrases that sound memorable and insightful and inspirational, but when you actually look at them they don’t mean much!

How many of you watched the opening ceremonies for the Vancouver Olympics on Friday night? Opening ceremonies are famous for memorable phrases. The CEO of VANOC, John Furlong, had this to say on Friday night:

As the Olympic Cauldron is lit, the unique magic of the Olympic Games will be released upon us.

Magic so rare that it cannot be controlled by borders. The kind of magic that invades the human heart touching people of all cultures and beliefs. Magic that calls for the best that human beings have to offer. Magic that causes the athletes of the world to soar and the rest of us to dream.

Huh? The words sure sounded nice and I sort of felt like I should be having some kind of a significant experience as I listened to them, but what do they actually mean?

So, when Paul says that no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ, is this just a nice-sounding phrase that makes us feel good but doesn’t mean much? Or is it communicating something significant?

PROMISES

Well, the obvious question is what has God promised? I did some snooping around in the Bible this week and I discovered that God makes an *awful* lot of promises! There is no possible way to outline them all here, but seeing as how I have talked about the importance of real people in real places in a real story, I thought I would take us on a brief tour of some of God’s promises.

Paul was a Jew—these would have been the stories he was raised on, the promises of God that were most familiar to him (I will not be citing the references for these stories, but the text of the sermon on the website will have them).

- God promises a mocked and ridiculed ship-builder who has survived forty days in a smelly floating livestock pen that he will never wipe out all of life (Gen 9:11)

- God promises a desert nomad from what is now southeastern Iraq that he will lead him to a new home and make a great nation out of him through whom all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:1-2)
- God promises this man's grandson, a lying, scheming, opportunist, that his offspring will be a blessing to all the earth and that God will give him land and watch over him wherever you goes (Gen 28:14-15).
- God promises a murderer on the run, an Israelite adopted as a prince of Egypt, who has fled for his life into the a foreign land, that he's going to bring his people out of Egypt, and worship God on the mountaintop" (Exodus 3:12).
- God promises a battle-hardened tribal leader and former spy, who is about to set foot into hostile enemy territory that he has no need to be afraid—that God will be with him in difficult circumstances (Joshua 1:9).
- God promises a shepherd/poet/warrior/adulterer/murder that he will make his name great, and establish his kingdom forever (2 Samuel 7:1-17).
- God promises a weary prophet who had seen numerous invasions and foreign rulers that his people “will go out in joy and be led forth in peace”—and that mountains and hills and trees are going to sing and clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12)!

This is just a small sampling of some of the stories, some of God's promises.

STRANGE ANSWERS

FOR ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD FIND THEIR YES IN HIM.

Well, we've seen a few promises God has made. How did God answer these?

- God promised Noah that he would never wipe out the whole earth in a flood again, but our earth has certainly seen its share of catastrophic misfortune since (earthquakes, typhoons, hurricanes, etc). In the Gospels, Jesus is described as the one whom the wind and the waves obey, but... the earth is still an unfriendly place for many.
- God promised Abraham that he would make a great nation out of him and that all of the earth would be blessed through him, but all Abraham ever saw was a small family (and one that that he had to wait a long time for!).
- God promised Moses that he would be a great deliverer and that one day the people would worship God on a mountain, but while he did rescue his people

from slavery, Moses died on that mountain, casting a longing glance into a land he would never enter.

- God promised Joshua victory and that he would be with him wherever he went, and Joshua *did* enjoy great military victories. But ultimately some of the nations survived and ended up luring Israel into all kinds of idolatry, evil, and ultimately, exile.
- God promised David a kingdom without end, but David's earthly kingdom of Israel would eventually be torn in two in a complex web of family feuding, greed, and idolatry.
- Through Isaiah, God promised his people peace and that nature itself would exult in their deliverance, and while Israel enjoyed moments of respite from occupation, their history has been one long story of conquest, occupation, and destruction.

Jesus is the “yes” to all of God’s promises? How?

At first glance, so many of these promises seem unfulfilled. Is Paul crazy? Deluded? How can he claim that in Christ *all* of God’s promises are “yes?”

And what does it mean to say that *in Christ* all of God’s promises are a “yes?” How can a person be an answer to a promise?

When I promise my kids something—to take them to the park, or to play road hockey with them, or to read them a book—they will evaluate whether or not I have kept my promise based on whether or not certain states of affairs come about. Does their dad *actually* take them to the park, etc? Action determines the truthfulness of the promise made. But how can a *person* be an answer to a promise?

But when we look at the story a little closer and we take a longer view, we begin to see that the person of Jesus really is the answer to God’s promises!

- God promises land; Jesus shows us our spiritual inheritance and points to the new heaven and the new earth that God is preparing for his people.
- God promises innumerable descendants; Jesus’ death and resurrection opened the door for all people, regardless of race and colour of skin and place of birth, to become a part of God’s family. In Jesus, God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham is fulfilled.
- God promises peace and justice and restoration to the prophets; Jesus is our Prince of Peace, who lays down his life for his enemies, who commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, and who promises to one day separate the sheep from the goats in an act of righteous judgment.

- God promises David that his kingdom will have no end, and in Jesus we see the kingdom of God being ushered in, where the law of God is written on people's hearts, where the first are last and the last first, and where Jesus is our High Priest and King.

Jesus is the "Yes" to God's promises, but he is an unusual yes. An unexpected yes. A yes that not many could have predicted. Nobody expected the hope of Israel and the light to the Gentiles to be crucified and rise again. That wasn't on anyone's radar. Not even Paul's!

Paul certainly didn't expect God to answer his promises in the way he did through Jesus. But as he looked at his life "backwards," he understood things more clearly; he had his expectations and his conceptions of who God is and how he keeps his promises changed. He began to see that God is a faithful keeper of promises, even when it doesn't look like it the time.

AND US?

Well, that's nice. We see how God fulfills a bunch of promises once upon a time in an unexpected way through Jesus.

What about us? What difference does any of this make for us? What's the moral of the story? That God answers his promises long after we're gone?

I think there *is* an application for us. I think Jesus is God's "yes" for us as well, and that looking at how he answers promises *does* matter for our lives.

Three things that I hope we can take away from here:

1. An appreciation of how God works.

We are a part of God's story and we need to learn from earlier parts. If we see God taking longer than his people might like, or answering in strange and beautiful ways that they might not have expected, then we can expect the same in our own lives. We won't be disheartened when God doesn't answer how/when we think he should. We can expect that when we look at our lives "backwards," we will see evidence of God's promises being fulfilled, sometimes in strange and beautiful ways.

2. An understanding that we still need God's promises.

- "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28-29).
- I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you (John 14:8).
- And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

- He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6).
- If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

These are promises that we can rely on, regardless of what we happen to be going through in our ever-changing lives. When our kids have wandered from the faith; when our marriage is in trouble; when our jobs are difficult or our career path is uncertain; when we're faced with the stress and heartache of caring for aging parents; when we're dealing with health struggles; or whatever else we are facing in the constantly changing river of our lives.

These promises continue to speak into our lives, even when we can't see it and don't feel it. These promises are God's reminder to us, saying, "I'm still in control, I'm still involved. Just focus on these and we'll get through this."

3. **A desire to embrace the part we have to play.**

Jesus is the "yes" to God's promises, but as the church, our job is to show Jesus to the world. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says this:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

It's one thing to know the stories, one thing to believe that God fulfilled his promises through Christ. It's another thing to believe that we, as God's image bearers, continue to bring about and point to God's promises. We are part of the way God's "yes" in Christ goes out to the world. We are the carriers of God's promise! That's exciting stuff!

Every act of the gospel, every helping hand extended, every act of love, every decision to forgive, every conversation where we share the reason for the hope we have, every concrete expression of grace and mercy, every person that is made to feel welcome and included among us, every meal made for someone in need, every dozen cookies sent off to the jail, every teenager who finds somewhere to belong on Tuesday or Wednesday night, every relief kit sent off to Haiti, every item we take off the board and give to a family in need... each one of these, done in the joy and the strength of the Lord, is a small way in which God's promises to bless and heal and redeem and restore his world are fulfilled.

FOR ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD FIND THEIR YES IN HIM.

It's not just a nice-sounding phrase. Paul was right. Whether in first-century or Corinth or 21st century Nanaimo, whether in a culture steeped in Greek philosophy or a post-Christian secularism... no matter where or when or who or why, all the promises of God find their "yes" in Christ.

Thanks be to God.

