



February 19, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

Mark 2:1-12

“The ‘yes’ of God”

Some of the best times of my life have been spent camping. When I was 9 years old, my mother decided she, my father and brother and I, should go camping regularly. She had some trouble convincing my dad, but she knew it would be the only way we could afford to take real vacations. There just wasn't money for motels. So, and if you knew my mom, you wouldn't doubt this for a minute, my mother went off to Sears one day and came home with a tent, four sleeping bags and air mattresses, a camp stove and lantern, metal dishes and pots, an axe, flashlights and so forth. She studied a map, picked out a reservoir in western Nebraska, and off we went.

I loved just about everything we did camping, but I especially treasured the end of the day. We would sit on rocks, logs or campstools (selected by my mom at Sears) gathered around our campfire. The smell and crackle of the wood was delicious. The warmth and light were powerful. I'd watch the sparks fly when my dad or brother would stir up the wood, and it was as beautiful as any fireworks display.

When I grew up, married and had my own family, we didn't have money for motels either. So we camped. And it continued to be a joy. I still loved the time around the campfire, but I had done some reading of Scripture, and the sparks, though beautiful, brought a verse from the book of Job to my mind. Job 5:7- "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward". Watch a fire sometime. The sparks always fly upward. I can't watch a fire today without remembering that verse. And a fleeting wisp of melancholy passes through me.

There is trouble in everyone's life, isn't there? The more years pass, the more I see that it's true. As a pastor, I strive to provide love and companionship to folks in the midst of trouble, so maybe I see more than the average person- but, maybe not.

One of the most difficult aspects of the trouble life brings, is the way we feel so helpless to do anything about it. Parents divorce and as a kid you wonder if it was your fault in some way. A precious child develops a serious illness. A car accident paralyzes the family breadwinner. Drugs seduce the gifted and talented teenager. A loved one commits a crime and goes to jail. Someone is careless and twelve people die in a house fire. Children just like ours don't have enough to eat and die of malnutrition. Gang violence, world tyranny, armed conflicts, wound, maim and kill innocent bystanders- who are just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These are immense tragedies. But life is filled with "little" disappointments, also. We understand they should be trivial, but they hurt us just the same. My husband had a dream for his life as a teenager. He planned to be a commercial aircraft pilot, working for Air France. But he had to pass a physical. And he learned, at the age of nineteen, that his hearing was impaired. It was a tremendous blow, and left him discouraged and bewildered about the shape his life should take.

The world tells us "Hey, that's just how it is." We embark upon a path, and the world throws us off it. No. You can't go that way. No. That's a dead end. The world tells us "no" again and again and again.

But, friends, we have good news: the good news of our faith. The good news tells us that God is IN this world of trouble. And that God is willing and able to say "yes" when the world says "no". The world would tell us life only brings fleeting happiness woven into toil and struggle. God, who comes to us through Jesus Christ, offers us an eternal "yes"- to all our needs, hopes and dreams.

Think about the Gospel story. A paralyzed man surely was a hopeless case. But Christ said, "Oh, just hush up and watch" to his detractors. And the paralyzed man was healed. Not only was he healed but he was forgiven. Christ can heal us. Christ can help us. Christ can forgive our sins. **THERE IS NOTHING GOD CANNOT LIFT US OUT OF.**

Have you ever heard a sports broadcaster, who really loves the game? You feel like you are actually right there in person. As the game progresses and he recounts its progress, with any sudden success of a player, he shouts, "YES! YES!YES!"

Friends, that's how God works. He murmurs, speaks, guides, directs. And when we follow his leading, we triumph. At each step we take, God cries out "yes!" His encouragement and patience have no limit.

I have experienced this at various points in my life. One such time occurred early in my ministry- more than 15 years ago.

I was really feeling low. My dad had terminal cancer. My husband had lost his job, found a job, and was miserable in his job. One of my kids was finding it tough to leave the nest, and very unhappy. Two others of my children were grappling with things like depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and related problems. We were seeing counselors, trying medications, doing the best we could to address these challenges.

I was having a hard time, realizing that my mother's generation probably had hereditary mood illnesses, and it was now my children's generation being struck by them. (A niece in high school was also diagnosed around that same time.)

There were three words that kept echoing in my mind. "All is lost". Over and over. "All is lost". I couldn't do anything to take away our trials. I couldn't "fix" any of it. I didn't know if anything would ever really be all right again.

This was during Advent, just before Christmas. A friend invited me to a women's daylong retreat, led by a Roman Catholic sister in a nearby town. I was glad to go- not really expecting it to help much, by maybe it might—a little.

When we arrived, the sister led us in some sharing and getting acquainted activities; then she led us in relaxation exercises. She shared a Scripture reading that God had laid on her heart- a good one for women- for women gathered during Advent. She read from Luke, the passage that tells of Mary's visit from the angel Gabriel, and of her willingness to be God's instrument. Mary then went to visit her family member, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with a special child. The story lifts up the joy the women felt at their meeting. It ends with these words, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

Friends, at that time, I was struggling to believe what God had told me, what God had promised me: an abundant life overflowing with joy. I knew that IS God's promise to each of us. Follow Jesus and you will taste joy and live an abundant life. I couldn't picture that ever happening for me, not with the sorrows I saw no way of escaping.

Our retreat leader then played soft music, and invited us to pray, reflect, draw, write—whatever we chose- as we reflected on this passage and God's presence with us.

I'm no artist, but she had markers and paper and I took some. I think I felt too depressed to try to write anything down about my feelings. I didn't have the energy to dredge up words. So I started to draw. I didn't think about what I was drawing exactly; the picture just seemed to come. And trust me—it wasn't a particularly lovely picture. But that drawing changed my life.

I found myself sketching Mary, pregnant with Jesus. I had her bowed in prayer, on her knees. Before I realized it, I was sketching in her unborn child, the little baby Jesus,

upside down inside her. And then, I began to draw this little rolled up scroll the baby was holding in his hands.

I took another piece of paper. I was ready to draw what was on the scroll. Clutched in the unborn Jesus' tiny hand was a scroll which, when opened, BECAME the vast heavens above with countless stars. And some of those countless stars spelled out words—words in English, from God to me. I read them as I drew the stars: “ALL IS NEVER LOST”. All is never lost. In bold capital letters. I started to cry and just sat by myself letting God's love enfold me.

I still have those drawings. Sometimes I look them over. I really believe what God was telling me that day. That doesn't mean I never encounter trouble—oh, trust me, I do. It doesn't mean that I am always upbeat with nary a doubt or fear. Trust me, there are times I struggle and wrestle again. But the scroll and its message are always there deep inside me. Like the baby Jesus in Mary, his mother.

The world will tell us all “no”. It will. Events unfold that we think we can never overcome. Things happen to us. We do wrong things that hurt other people. But, God can turn every “no” to “yes”. He can and he will. You see, that's what the cross teaches us too. The cross was a pretty big “no”. You think your ways will win? You think God can triumph over this? Just watch us, we'll torture and kill you and stamp out your message. The cross said, “No” to Jesus, to God. But God took the cross and made it a “yes”. “Yes, I love you. Yes, my power, the power of love, mercy and forgiveness, that power is invincible. Yes it is. Yes it is. Yes it is.”

And the risen Christ visited with the women he loved, ate with his disciples and said, “See? The “no” of the world cannot and will not win. Embrace my ways of love and mercy, and you, too, will triumph. Follow me, I will show you the way.”

Friends, let's follow Jesus. He wants us to travel together. He will be the leader. We're supposed to help each other along the road. And he wants us to remind each other of his “yes!” With each faithful step he says, “yes!” God will make a way where it seems there is no way. We can help each other spy out the turns and twists of that road. Do not be afraid. There is trouble in the world, but Christ has overcome the world. Amen. Amen.