

“Yes, and”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Esther 4:1-17, Luke 1:46b-55
December 9, 2018
Second Sunday of Advent

The book of Esther is a dark comedy, a melodrama for the ages, equal parts comical farce and resistance literature. When Jewish congregations read the story at the Festival of Purim, people show up in costumes and there’s whooping and cheering and loud booing of the vile villain Haman. We have talked so much about the exile recently as we’ve heard from the prophets, but this is a post-exile story. The Persians have booted the Babylonians and restored a measure of liberty, but many Israelites have remained abroad for generations, living in diaspora as foreigners in the only homeland they’ve known.

Our story concerns Esther, raised in Persia by her relative Mordecai. The king, Ahasuerus, is drawn as a buffoon. He likes gold and treats women as disposable. He’s impetuous and quick-tempered and seems to make decisions based on the last and loudest voice he’s heard. I see no modern parallels.

When his wife refuses to put on a beauty show for his friends, King Ahasuerus blows a gasket and kicks her to the curb and goes in search of a newer, younger bride. Esther, pleasing to the king, is plucked from obscurity and becomes queen. At Mordecai’s behest, she keeps her Jewish lineage a secret. As our reading picks up, there is a real threat to the Jewish people of Persia, for the king’s chief deputy, evil Haman, has convinced old Ahasuerus to kill them all.

Listen for God’s word to us from the fourth chapter of the book of Esther:

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. In every province, wherever the king’s command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther’s maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.

Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.”

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

In early 2017 I took an Intro to Improvisational Theater class at ArtPlay through UAB’s Alys Stephens Center. It was part of my plan to complete my transformation into the whitest guy in these United States. If you know anything at all about improv, you know that its first rule is “Yes, and.” You work with your scene partners as a team. If they offer something, like “what a fine day to be plumbers!” your job is to agree to the premise and add something. “It sure is. And what could be more fun than plunging toilets at Disneyland!” Those who dive headlong into the nerdy world of improv use “Yes, and” as a verb: “I yes and-ed the heck out of that Session meeting!”

One of my improv heroes is the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana. She’s a friend and a mentor and has written a book about how the principles of improv apply to the life of faith. MaryAnn wants us to “Yes, and” life, but she says that before we can do the “and” part, “We need to deal with Yes first, get it loaded in our hearts and minds and bodies, because we live in a world saturated with No.”¹

No, that idea is too idealistic.

No, you don’t belong here.

No, you’re not the right type of person.

No, it’s not practical.

No, there’s not enough to go around, so go back from whence you came.

Now, of course “no” is a crucial word with its own power and is deeply appropriate at times. But I’m talking about the overall stance we take in life. In a college commencement address, comedian Stephen Colbert told the graduates, “Cynics always say no. But saying ‘yes’ begins things. Saying ‘yes’ is how things grow. Saying ‘yes’ leads to knowledge.”²

MaryAnn sees three options when your scene partner, or the people in your life, or your all-knowing God offers you an idea, a suggestion, a plan, or an open door:

You can *block* it. Also known as *saying no*.

You can *accept* it — saying *yes*.

Or you can *over-accept* it — say *yes, and* and embrace it and run with it.

You are offered bread, and you don’t just take it, you make french toast with it and invite friends over

¹ *God, Improv, and the Art of Living* by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, p. 12

² McKibben Dana, p. 32

for brunch. You are offered relationship, and you don't just use it for your benefit, but you invest energy and cause it to grow. You are offered fishes and loaves, and you make a feast to feed thousands. You are offered a last meal with your friends, and you turn it into a sacrament. You are offered death on a cross, and you over-accept it and make it into resurrection.

Perhaps another word for "over-accept" or "yes, and" is "magnify."
"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Mary and Esther both find their way to "Yes, and."

While the powerful toy with human life, these women respond with "Yes, and" for such a time as this.

Pastors like to joke that the answer to the popular song "Mary Did You Know?" is "Yes, she knew! Have you read Luke 1?" Mary, so innocent and young, has no time for your pity. She has got god-bearing to do. She has got a prophetic word to sing. She responds to this absolutely bananas situation with fierce faith and commitment and a steady hand. I have no evidence that God approached or even thought about choosing anyone but Mary. But I am convinced that God knew her response would be to "yes, and" the message from the angel.

On the other hand, Mordecai is pretty clear to Esther that if she chooses to say "no" to sticking her neck out, God will find another way, but she will have missed her chance to be a part of salvation and deliverance.

I'm reminded of the story we read on Palm Sunday — the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In Luke's telling, the people are shouting "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" And the Pharisees warn him that all this hubbub is going to get somebody killed. Best to keep quiet. But Jesus tells them, "if these were silent, the stones would shout out." God will find a way. Let them shout. Let them say "yes." Let them magnify and be a part of it.

From the *whizz-bang-spark* of creation, God has been saying "Yes! And!" and then turning to this created order and seeking to build scenes of grace and beauty. We know the trees of the field clap their hands and the all God's critters got a voice in the choir and we are called to respond with our God-given creativity to join in creation and redemption and salvation. And, yet, how rarely we manage to magnify. We spend a lot of time squashing each other's beliefs and dreams. Meanwhile, a disturbing No force has arisen to split us: a force that says *Yes* to neo-Nazis and white supremacists and *No* to refugee moms with little children seeking safe harbor.

Today we are saying *Yes, and* to a new family in our congregation. Staci and Shaye have built a relationship and then a marriage on love and *Yes* and then here comes their *and* in little Beckett. Shortly I will ask you if you promise to guide and nurture this family by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church? And you'll say "We do" but I know you'll mean "yes, and we'll show up for them when times are tough and we'll show up for them to celebrate and we'll let them change us as much as we change them and together we'll all do our best to magnify God in this world."

Two candles now guide us in our Advent preparation for the Prince of Peace. We encountered the prophet Habakkuk last week, and what we took away was a call to tend to a hope that frustrates and frightens the powers of destruction. To that we add laughter in the face of annihilation, learned from

the Jewish people. We add singing a song of God flipping the world's power on its head. We look around and wonder what it is we are being called to do and wonder if we might have been brought wherever we are for such a time as this.

If Mary and Esther and Shiphrah and Puah — the Egyptian midwives — and Moses and Samuel and Peter and Paul had all chosen *No*, if they had failed to build upon what God offered them, God would have found another way. But they said “Yes, and” and conspired with God to secure liberation and life and beauty and truth from the shadows that threatened to swallow them.

In this Second Week of Advent, Edgewood, may you have seven days of *Yes, anding* whatever is placed before you. Give it a try for the week. And if that feels like it's working, feel free to magnify it.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (1 John 1:1-5)

Amen.