

Yes and No
[Genesis 2:4-17, 3:1-7](#)
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Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, a season of reflection and preparation as we move towards Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. And there is an old tradition in the church that during Lent, you're supposed to give something up. You find something in your life that you can do without for the next forty days, and from Ash Wednesday until the sun comes up on Easter Sunday, whatever that thing is, you can't have it, you can't do it, you must abstain, you must deny yourself, you must say NO. And the idea behind this discipline is that it is a good practice, a good skill to develop in yourself, the ability to say no, the habit of self-control. Ideally, every time you would normally do this thing that you usually do, instead of doing that thing, you would spend the time contemplating the grace of God, or Christ's suffering, or something pious and holy like that. And that is a great idea, it really is, and I'm sure Mother Theresa and the Pope have absolutely no trouble pulling that off, but for the rest of us, it usually isn't that easy. A few years ago I made the terrible mistake of giving up coffee for Lent, and I will be perfectly honest with you, at every moment in those forty days when I wanted a cup of coffee, I did not spend that time contemplating the grace of God, or Christ's suffering, no. I spent that time contemplating how desperately I wanted a cup of coffee. And while I made it through, and it was probably good for me to learn just how reliant on

caffeine I really am, I know that during those forty days I was probably a lot less patient and kind with the people around me than should've been, and I also confess that when the sun rose on Easter Sunday, well, the fact that Jesus Christ is risen from the grave, that death had been vanquished forever and ever and sin had no more hold on me, that was the second-best news I heard that morning. That's the problem with human beings - when we hear No, when we tell ourselves No, when we let go of something and set something aside, we have a really hard time seeing anything but that No, the thing we're not supposed to have, the thing we're not supposed to do. We ignore everything else and only focus on the No.

We can see that in today's reading from the book of Genesis, part of the very famous and familiar story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. You are probably familiar with the basics of this story - God creates Adam and Eve, puts them in this beautiful garden, and tells them - DON'T EAT FROM THIS TREE. NO. DO NOT TOUCH. And then he leaves them alone for a few minutes, and he comes back and they're covered in fruit juice, spinning stories about a very persuasive serpent, and that's the beginning of everything that's ever gone wrong in the history of humankind. That's the story we know. But before we get to the serpent and the forbidden fruit, before we get to the sin and the accusations and the judgment and the casting out of the garden, we should take a moment and really consider what that garden is like. God places Adam and Eve in the garden, and he gives them the grand tour, he walks them through this glorious place and

shows off his handiwork, describes all the rivers running through the landscape, each one with its own precious gems and mineral abundance around it, and he shows them all the things he has created for their enjoyment and sustenance. “Adam, Eve, come on through here, I want to show you this. So here you’ve got your basic fruits and berries - apples in this section, lots of varieties, pears down this way, various citrus fruits over here, persimmons, pomegranates. I’ve been experimenting with melons in this area, so let me know what you think, feedback is very helpful. Over here we’ve got the trees of other assorted foodstuffs - chocolate trees, buttered popcorn trees, this one has something called ‘pizza’ that I’m particularly proud of. This section is the trees of pleasant experiences - that’s the tree of warm socks on a rainy day, tree of a stack of paperback books at the cottage, and that’s the tree of finding a parking spot right next to where you’re going just as you pull up. This whole section is the orchard of baby animals - starts with aardvarks at this end and works its way down to zebras. Hedgehogs are in season right now, but the otters are still a little green, might want to give them a week. And then here in the middle you’ve got the really good stuff - tree of happiness, tree of exhilaration, tree of fulfilled anticipation, tree of comfiness, and of course, the tree of abundant, everlasting life. So that’s the garden. There’s still a few little things I’m working on, but overall I think it looks pretty good. Any questions? Yes, Adam?”

“Duh, what’s that tree? The little shrubby twisted one with the fog and stench and floating skulls around it?”

“Good question, Adam. Excellent observation. That’s the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Don’t eat from that tree. It’ll bring untold misery on the entire universe, death, pain, war, famine, disease, just general suffering on all future generations from now until the end of time. That tree is Not For You. But as I’ve said, there’s lots of other trees, lots and lots of delicious fruit all throughout the garden for you two to enjoy, so there’s absolutely no reason you could possibly have to eat the very unpleasant tasting and universe-destroying fruit from that one little tree, right? Right. So, you two have fun, I’m going to go work on the melons for awhile, and I’ll check back on you in a few minutes.” And of course, we all know what’s going to happen. Of course they’re going to do the one thing they’re not supposed to do, they’re going to make a beeline for the one single tree they’re not supposed to touch. Because they’re human, and that’s the problem with human beings - when we hear No, we have a really hard time seeing anything but that No, that thing we’re not supposed to have, that thing we’re not supposed to do. We ignore everything else and only focus on the No.

And usually when we hear this story, we do the same thing. We hear this story, and we immediately zero in on that one little tree, that one little No right in the middle of the garden, that’s what we focus on. What’s that tree doing there? Why did God put that tree in anyway? What’s so bad about a

little knowledge of good and evil? What kind of an operation is this? We focus on that No, and we miss what's really important, we miss everything else that's happening in this story. This garden is amazing. It is unbelievably good, unbelievably blessed, and it is filled with trees, good trees, beautiful trees, and each and every one of those trees is a YES. Each and every one of those other trees are God's YES to Adam and Eve, God's YES to humanity, God saying YES, this is yours, this is for you, over and over again to these blessed, beloved people. Adam and Eve and all of us, we focus on the one single little No in this garden, and we ignore all the other trees, all the other YESes that are all around us, we miss the forest for the tree, we miss the YESes for the NO.

And we do this with more than this story. We do this with more than just trees. So often when people think about God, about God's law, about God's relationship with humanity, we think that it's a relationship built around NO, around God keeping us from doing what we really want to do, God spoiling our fun and making sure life is grim and serious and downright boring. We act like the entire point of the church is to be God's police force, saying No, No, No to everyone around us, constantly reminding everyone of all the rules they're breaking, constantly setting up road blocks and barriers in people's way to keep them from doing anything they might accidentally enjoy. And of course, it is true that sometimes God's word to us, God's word to the world, sometimes it's No. There are some things we do that are not good for us, that do not spread God's love and build his kingdom and

move us closer and closer to knowledge of our creator and king, and to all those things, we should say No. But NO is never God's only word to humanity. NO is never God's final word to humanity. God doesn't just tell us what not to do, God gives us guidance and love and shows us what we should do, how we should live, God blesses us and builds us up and shows us how to use the good things we've been given us in good, life-giving, life-affirming ways. Every time God tells us No, there is always a YES, every time we reach a barrier, there is always another path forward that leads towards life, every time we see a tree that isn't meant for us, there is always an entire garden of blessed, abundant, fruitful trees all around us, created for us to enjoy, When we focus on the NO, when we keep our eyes fixed on one little tree, we miss out on the YES, we miss out on all the other blessings that God has in store for all humanity.

And the way that we know this is true is that we see it in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God looked at this broken, beat-up planet, at all the broken, beat-up human beings who just couldn't figure things out, who couldn't stop ourselves from evil and pain and sin, kept digging ourselves deeper and deeper into this pit of death and despair, God looked at us and decided to say YES. Even while we are still sinners, even while we are still so far away from who we were meant to be, In Jesus Christ God says YES to us, In Jesus Christ God welcomes us back to the garden, In Christ God looks at us as perfect, forgiven, restored and resurrected children, just as we are. Today we gather in God's presence to meet with our saviour, Jesus Christ, and here

in this place, Jesus Christ says YES to you, whoever you are, wherever you've come from, whatever you've done, Jesus Christ welcomes you here, welcomes you home, and says YES, this is yours, this is for you. And all you have to do, the only thing you have to do, is stop looking at all the NOs that once seemed so important, and just look to Jesus Christ, and say YES. Come back to the garden and eat from the tree of life. This is for you. Say Yes.

Amen