

## When God Says, "No"

[Mark 14:32-36](#)

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In every life there are defining moments that you never forget. A woman strokes the hair of her beloved husband of fifty years who is in intensive care. It is not clear if he will live or die. The doctors say all we can do is watch and pray. A young couple decide to have a child. It took a long time to find the courage, but they made the big decision. Only she doesn't get pregnant. After a gauntlet of fertility treatments, they find that there is nothing else to try. Nothing else except more prayer. A fatigued woman is stuck in a job that she really, really hates. She lost count of how many times she has asked God to get her out of this lousy job. Still, she prays.

We are used to hearing stories that start out like this. The odds were against you. You prayed your knees off. And in the darkest point of the struggle, God pulled through at the last possible moment and said "Yes" to your prayers. You received your heart's desire. Those are wonderful stories, and they happen all the time. But in my experience as a pastor, those are not really the defining moments of a life. Rather our lives are shaped more by the times when God says, "No."

Think back on your greatest disappointments in life. Remember when it was clear that the disaster you wanted to avoid was unavoidable, when the relationship you wanted so much fell apart, when your dreams did not come true? Remember when, in spite of all your fervent prayers, God said, "No"? You were never the same after that. That is why it was a defining moment.

We are promised that the fervent prayers of the righteous availeth much (James 6:16 KJV). We are not told that we receive what we want. Sometimes "No" avails more than "Yes." Mostly what "No" makes available to us is the grace of God, which shapes our lives more than our dreams.

Not even Jesus received everything he asked for in prayer. Our text today finds him in the Garden of Gethsemane, hours away from the cross. He knows what is ahead. He has known it from the moment he identified with us sinners in his baptism. He has repeatedly warned the disciples that this day would come. But now that it is here, Mark tells us that Jesus is "distressed and agitated...deeply grieved." Luke tells us that he was sweating blood.

Sometimes the defining moments in life come not because your life is interrupted by something unforeseen, but because you're finally having to do what you have been dreading for a long time. You've prayed to get out of it, to escape this thing, but to no avail. You're going to have to confront an alcoholic who is destroying the family. You're going to have to let your daughter marry a man who you know is going to be bad for her. You tried to talk her out of it. You prayed for God to prevent this. But he didn't. Or maybe you're going to have to make a move to another city, another move, that you've tried to avoid. You can't believe you are going to lose your life again. When these unavoidable crisis moments come, it feels like you are going to a cross.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to a place of prayer. When you're about to face a cross, you don't want to be alone. No, you call on your friends to pray with you. But the text makes it clear that Jesus eventually went ahead without them in prayer. It doesn't matter how many friends you have, on the nights when you are up all night wrestling with how it is, you know this is now between you and God.

Alone in the Garden, Jesus fell on his face and began to pray. "Abba father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." Can you imagine how this prayer must have broken the heart of God? His only son is lying face down on the ground begging, "Abba, Papa, please don't send me to the cross." But the Father said, "No." It also breaks God's heart on those dark nights when you are also praying face down, in total humility. You're out of strategies and plans and are now reduced to simply pleading, "Please, don't let this marriage end in divorce." "Please, deliver me from this cancer that is sucking my life away."

Why would Abba Father ever say "No" to these prayers? Why do we sometimes have to go to the cross? Because it is there that we meet Jesus, the Savior.

Your life is not defined by the things you want. Nor by the things you want to avoid. Your life is defined, and shaped, and molded by living in the hands of a Savior who finds you at the cross, where he also had to go. Finding you there, he then raises you to a new life that far exceeds your expectations.

This is not a sermon about fatalism or resignation. I am not telling you to simply fasten your seatbelts and accept what comes. Even you have to face a cross, even if really bad things happen to you, you are not necessarily a victim. Victims assume they don't have choices. As Jesus illustrates you can always choose your response, even to God's "No."

Viktor Frankl, who survived the Nazi concentration camps, claimed that in the camps he learned the last of all human freedoms that can never be taken away is to choose your response to anything. So no matter how small the ration of bread was that he received, Frankl always chose to give some of it away to another starving prisoner. In doing that he chose to remain a human being, and he chose not to be a victim.

Jesus is clearly not a victim, because he makes the most heroic choice possible. "Nevertheless," he says, "not what I want, but what you want." That nevertheless is the greatest synonym for faith we have. "Abba Father, you know this is not what I want, I can't see how I will survive it, I can't even see the good that will come out of it, nevertheless, I want what you want." When you say "nevertheless" I want your will, God, you are placing your life in the hands of a God who can raise the dead. He can raise dead relationships, dead dreams, and even dead bodies. You can't see that now. All you can see is the cross. But the new life is waiting, if you choose to live in the hands of God. You've got to choose to believe that. It is the only way your soul will survive the cross.

When Martin Luther went to the ecclesiastical trial in Worms that he prayed to avoid, it was a defining moment. He was sweating blood, thinking his use to the church was over. When Calvin went back to Geneva to lead the Reformation he was terrified. They had already thrown him out once, and he knew that in returning they may kill him. When Rev. Byron Sunderland, pastor of this congregation, invited the abolitionist Frederick Douglas to preach from this pulpit, Washington was essentially a Southern town. He made that decision, knowing it would cost him dearly. Members would leave the church, which they did. He assumed his pastorate here was over. Nevertheless, he did it because it was the right thing to do.

Because Martin Luther said, "nevertheless," he was raised up to lead the Reformation. If John Calvin had not said, "nevertheless," we would not now be Presbyterians. After Byron Sunderland said, "nevertheless," he led this congregation for 30 more wonderful years.

So now how about you? As you stare at the cross that now defines your future, as you hear God's undeniable "No" to the request to avoid it, what will your response be? You can choose to be a victim and sink into despair. Or you can choose to have hope. You can choose to believe that nothing, not even death, can separate you from the love of God and his future filled with hope.

There is no cross without the resurrection. There is no resurrection without the cross.

Protect us, O God, from wasting our suffering. When the cross is laid upon our shoulders, give us the vision to believe in the new life that is also coming. And with that vision transform our frightened lives.