

## The Doctrine of the “Ongoing ‘Yes!’”

Pastor Laurie Hartzell’s Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,  
Sunday, September 29, 2019

### **Isaiah 40:28-31**

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

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This fall we are weaving two strands together in our sermons. The first strand is a fruit of the spirit. The fruit of the spirit this week is patience, and Arianne has created a coconut for the fruit basket to represent patience because, as she said, it takes patience and perseverance to get the meat out of a coconut. Our Spiritual Life Committee decided to focus in worship on the fruits of the spirit as a way of helping us prayerfully reflect on what it means to live as Christ followers in this divided and often very tense time in our country and the world.

The second strand has to do with my leaving. As I mentioned last week, a former pastor of this congregation, Dirk Ficca, once compared the title of a Robert Folghum poem, “Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” to First Presbyterian when he said that much of what he needs to know about doing ministry he learned here at First Presbyterian Church. I feel the same way. I’ve learned so much these past 10 years as a pastor and 15 years before that as a layperson from you and with you as we’ve lived into God’s work in the world together in this place. So, in these last sermons that I preach in this great church as your pastor, I’m going to share some things I learned from and with you as we’ve done ministry together.

Last week I talked about what I called “The Doctrine of Showing Up.” This week I’m going to talk about “The Doctrine of the Ongoing ‘Yes!’”

The text from Isaiah 40 that I just read to you is from what Bible scholars refer to as the second part of Isaiah. The first 39 books of Isaiah – or first part of Isaiah – were written by the prophet Isaiah to the people of God when they were in Jerusalem. In the first part of this book, the prophet shares his grief with the people and God’s grief that they have lost their way in economic policies and military policies that hurt and oppress others and are rooted in lack of faith and trust in the ways of loving and living God. Most Bible scholars believe that Isaiah 40, a section of which we read today, was written after the people of Jerusalem had been taken away in captivity by the Babylonians. There is a big time gap – maybe even up to 200 years – between the writing of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah and then chapters 40-55. So Isaiah himself didn’t write the 40th chapter, but most likely a person who followed in his footsteps did. And this second section of the book was written to a broken people who had lost everything. When the Babylonians came, the temple in Jerusalem was ransacked and some of the families were split

up. They lost their belongings and homes. They lost everything. Can you imagine a foreign power coming into our country and taking us all from our homes and churches and things we love dearly and bringing us to be slaves in their homeland?

In this second part of Isaiah, the people are given words of hope as they live in this condition. Take comfort, the writer says: God hasn't forgotten you. You will be able to go home. And in the portion of our text that we read today, the writer encourages people to keep waiting on the Lord. Keep waiting. Keep trusting. Keep being faithful. I would say it this way: Keep saying yes to God, keep saying yes to hope, despite the times of confusion and loss, despite the uncertainty about the future, despite the profound losses. Keep saying yes to God.

And the promise in this text is that, as we wait, as we keep saying yes, God will continue to fill the people with hope and give them the strength they need. Indeed, they will not only have strength, they will soar like eagles.

As I think about our church, First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor, one thing that strikes me and has mentored me is the capacity that this church has had over the years to live the "ongoing 'yes'" to God. Now, we don't live in the kind of pain those people lived in back when this text was written – we haven't been torn from our homeland recently – though some of your ancestors experienced that when they were taken as slaves in Africa. But we do know the experiences of feeling lost, feeling confused, feeling like we've lost our way. We know the feelings of hopelessness as we continue to battle the ailments of the culture of poverty and the racism that continues to bind our nation. We may know exhaustion and discouragement as we face situations in our family and in our world.

What I've learned here among you is the power of the discipline of waiting, and of continuing to practice trust and say yes to God, amid whatever is going on. Let me give you some examples of the "ongoing 'yes'" I've seen you live here.

Our church is a racially integrated church. It has been so since the 1960s. My friends, that is over 50 years. Now, most churches in communities like ours that have experienced white flight go through a pattern something like this. They are a white church. Blacks move into the neighborhood, and maybe a few will come to the church. Eventually, if the church survives, it will become a black church. But our church has stayed racially integrated. St Augustine's Episcopal is also a small, racially integrated church in town and has been so for many decades like us. There are a few younger, racially integrated congregations in our area – Overflow Church and Freedom Church have sprung up in the past 10 years – which give me hope. But, my friends, in this church we have had the courage and integrity to live the "ongoing 'yes'" of doing the work to bridge racial divides in our church and in our community. Given the propensity of white people to not even notice how we grab power or wield privilege, it is no small thing that many of our black members keep saying yes. Sometimes we misunderstand each other and each other's ways. I know you all – by being yourselves – have invited me to look deep within at the racism that was bred into my heart growing up in this nation. This kind of racial integration is a gift and can be fragile, and you – you – keep saying YES to it. And I along with you.

A second thing: Our church has stayed in this community and keeps saying yes here. There were a number of crossroads in the history of this congregation when we could have moved. In the mid-1950s a number of families in this church felt that First Presbyterian should move out of the neighborhood. A group left and formed Fairplain Presbyterian on Napier Avenue. A core group stayed to live out ministry here on Morton Hill, and to speak an ongoing YES to the Morton Hill Community. In the late 1970s there was a fire in Goff Hall that destroyed a chunk of it. If the church was going to move, that would've been a good time to move, but they chose to repair the damage and stay. And we reached a crossroads again in this decade when we had to figure out what to do with our building. As a church that always put its limited resources into mission and people, almost every part of our building was in need of work, and even Gordon Helm's ingenious fixes could not ensure our building a future for ministry. The Open Wide Our Front Door campaign – born in thoughtful prayer and discernment – was a bold effort and, some people even thought, a dumb effort to save our building and prepare it for the next season of ministry here on Morton Hill. Yes, Lord! Yes, we will stay. Yes, we will keep offering a safe and warm and loving space for ourselves and our community. Yes, the “ongoing ‘YES!’”

Our church keeps saying yes to partnering in the community to address community problems and keeps saying yes in our own outreach ministries and in programs that help us live out our mission statement. As long as I've been here, this church has been under 100 members, mostly in the 70-80 range. But even though you are a small church, you are an active church. Let me list just some of the programs and other efforts that have come out of this church over the years:

The CORD housing program, no longer in existence, but in the 1980s it helped many people get affordable houses. After-school programming for children, after-school and summer reading programs for children and youth, Summer Youth Leadership Program, partnership with the Southwest Michigan correction facility and mentoring programs to help men and women transition into society after being on parole and turned into our Thursday night suppers. Multiple programs with Morton Elementary School and Benton Harbor Area Schools. For many years our people, under the leadership of Martha Momany, even offered a library at Morton. Summer Work Camp/Service learning program that offers space for people to come into our community and do good work while learning about their own racism. This church has had a food pantry, offering emergency food assistance in this community, for well over 20 years. Our Thursday night suppers offer food and, we hope, a family-style feeling of acceptance, to an average of 50 people each week. As long as I have been part of this church, we always seem to have a small group of youth from the community whom we take under our wings and nurture.

Jeannette Holton talks about how so many social programs are good at offering ways to pull people out of the river of poverty and despair, but it is important for us to go upriver and find out why people are in the river in the first place. What systems are operating that throw people in the river? Part of our ongoing “yes” is to wrestle with that question. This past year we started a business development group with Refreshing Fountains Church of God in Christ to consider how to bring streams of wealth creation through entrepreneurship into the black community as a way of addressing systemic poverty. In our own programming, we keep saying YES! We also believe that partnership is vital and necessary in our work. We partner with the Boys and Girls

Clubs, the Fresh Start Children's Garden, the OutCenter, the Soup Kitchen, Harbor Habitat for Humanity which, if you didn't know, was started by our own Jeanine and Ken Rogers. We partner with MOSAIC ministries, the work of the Southwest Michigan Ministerial Alliance, and more. Whenever we see good work bubbling up in the community, we seek to join that work as we can. An ongoing YES!!!!

And I don't need to tell you that doing this kind of work is not always easy. Our congregation is located on the margins. Our congregation in most of my time here has been on the margins financially – always having just enough to do what we are called to do – but often nickeling and diming and being quite resourceful to do our work. And many of our people live on the margins. Some of those among us are surely in survival mode as they live day to day and week to week in obtaining food, housing, care for their children and more.

Living on the margins requires a deep commitment to the ongoing "yes." Living on the margins requires learning to look for the manna each day that God provides for God's people and for ministries like ours. Living and thriving on the margins require a deep commitment to holding onto hope.

I don't need to tell you that the work can be heavy at times and overwhelming. A few weeks ago, I got a call from the Soup Kitchen about a friend of ours who is in the hospital. And when I arrived at the hospital, I realized that this person has no family support because they burned their bridges with addictions, had no home to go to after being discharged, and didn't have the cognitive capacity to make good decisions for himself. Yes, the hospitals have social workers, but these kinds of challenges are pervasive in our community. There are so many people – many who are trying very hard – who live on the tail end of a fringe, hanging on for dear life.

And the challenge is to walk the line of continuing to be fully present – to show up, as I said last week – while also knowing we can't fix everything for everyone. For me, the "ongoing 'yes'" has to do with holding life and joy and pain with people. For me, the "ongoing 'yes'" has to do with connecting people with other people who may have resources and support for them. The "ongoing 'yes'" has to do with continuing to ask what we are supposed to be DOING.

You have taught me that the "ongoing 'yes'" means I am mindful of when I feel myself getting jaded and ask for grace and help from God in not letting despair or hopelessness infect my soul.

When I was on sabbatical a few years ago, I spent almost 14 days at St. Meinrad's Abbey in southern Indiana. The abbey is about 10 miles from the Ohio River, and one day one of the brothers asked me if I had taken the time to visit the river and sit by it. I told him I hadn't, and he highly encouraged me to go. So I did. On that day I sat on a bench, and within a few minutes five large birds of prey – eagles, I'm certain – started flying over the river. No, started gliding over the river. Because the thing that I noticed is that their wings were hardly flapping. The eagles would catch a piece of wind and glide. The wind did the work. They just said yes to the wind and let the wind carry them. I was transfixed for over an hour, just watching those eagles and, of course, couldn't help but think of our passage for today. They that wait on God, who

keep saying yes to God, will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. I believe God's message to me that day was to be like those eagles. Saying YES isn't about lots of hard work and flapping all the time. Saying yes has to do with paying attention to the winds of God's spirit and letting the Spirit take me and take us where the Spirit will!

Now, don't forget: Saying yes doesn't mean we say yes to everything and wear ourselves out. We must be discerning about what is our part. Also, when we say yes to God, we also say yes to sabbath keeping, to resting and trusting our lives and work to God. Now, I must say, I did not learn sabbath keeping from you. You all work so very hard! I did, however, learn about saying yes to sabbath keeping when I was on sabbatical a few years ago. Because I learned that the only way I can keep discerning what I am to say yes to, and what I have the capacity to say yes to from a full heart, comes when I take time for sabbath keeping. Taking moments, or an hour and a day each week and bigger chunks of time during the year, to leave it all in God's hands – remembering this church and our work belong to God – I've learned here that the only way I could keep saying yes to the work is by saying yes to sabbath, recognizing that it is God's spirit and energy that lead and give us what we need to keep loving and keep saying yes.

So, my friends, along with "The Doctrine of Showing Up," I will take "The Doctrine of the 'Ongoing Yes!'" with me to Grand Rapids. There will be days, because there always are in ministry, when I want to throw in the towel. There will be days when the cost seems too high. There will be days when the racism and poverty and meanness of people take their toll. There will be days when God's people seem lost, and I with them. But the "ongoing 'YES'" to God's call means I keep saying yes to God, keep being willing to jump into the work in front of me, keep being creative with others about how to work on problems upriver and at the root of the problem. I'm thinking of that old spiritual: "I'm determined to walk with Jesus, yes I am! I'm determined to walk with Jesus, yes I am! Through my trials and tribulations, persecutions, I'll be faithful. I'm determined to walk with Jesus, yes I am!"

And the good news, the very good news, is that I don't need to conjure up that "yes" all by myself. The Holy Spirit – inside you, inside me, inside us – gives us what we need if we can rest in him.

And I encourage you to keep living this "ongoing 'yes'" here, my friends. Keep saying yes to this community. Keep saying yes to doing the hard work of racial and socio-economic healing. Keep saying yes to listening to each other and learning and growing in faith. Keep saying yes to partnerships. Keep saying yes to doing good work and asking how to address problems at the root, as well as walking with people in the present. Keep saying yes to hanging in there with tough situations you may be called to. Learn to say yes more to Sabbath keeping. Keep saying yes to the spirit as She guides us in learning more about opening wide the front door.

And in these tense and divisive times in our nation, let us keep saying yes to kindness and respect. Keep saying yes to loving the immigrant and doing justice. Keep saying yes – as God's spirit leads us – as we are given the grace to mount up with wings like eagles. Keep saying yes. **Amen.**