

Beyond Resistance: Learning to Say Yes

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[0 : 00] When the ground beneath our feet trembles, how can we find solid ground?! These days, everything can feel like ice breaking underfoot when we try to put our full weight on it.

Even if the specific shape of our uncertainty looks different, each of us are entering this room with so many questions about how to show up in our lives, how to make a positive difference, how to connect with God and with each other.

Sitting with these questions is what it means to live inside the holy Saturdays of our lives, when God seems absent. For the past few weeks, we have been in a series in the book of Jeremiah, exploring how to survive these Saturdays when hope seems distant and despair seems logical.

Like the prophet Jeremiah, we are navigating a time when we are teetering on a razor's edge.

Jeremiah lived during a moment when his entire nation and way of life was jeopardized by the cold hand of empire reaching down to destroy everything that he knew and loved.

And he felt like he couldn't do anything but warn the people about what was to come. And I don't know what this says about me, but ever since I was young, I've connected to Jeremiah.

[1 : 35] Jeremiah, because of this feeling of being called to preach a word that was perhaps too big for me, but never big enough for God. But I confess that there are moments when I want to turn away from the violence, the anger, the uncertainty on every street corner.

The way back home seems further away than ever. When everything is shaken, we often don't know why we should remain faithful at all.

And what being faithful even means. It seems easier to just go along and keep a fragile peace that is the absence of conflict rather than the presence of justice.

In the middle of the book of Jeremiah, we encounter a community that remained faithful despite imperial power bearing down on them.

So please turn in your Bible to Jeremiah 35. I recommend keeping it open throughout my sermon because I'll kind of read the first part and then revisit it about midway through.

[2 : 44] The words will also be on the screen. I'm also going to move over so I can see everybody's lovely faces. Jeremiah 35, beginning in verse 1.

This is the message the Lord gave Jeremiah when Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, was king of Judah. Go to the settlement where the families of the Rechabites live and invite them to the Lord's temple.

Take them into one of the inner rooms and offer them some wine. So I went to see Josiah, son of Jeremiah and grandson of Habasaniah and all his brothers and sons, representing all the Rechabite families.

I took them to the temple and we went into the room assigned to the sons of Hanan, some of Iqdalia, a man of God. This room was located next to the one used by the temple officials, directly above the room of Messiah, son of Shalom, the temple gatekeeper.

I set cups and jugs of wine before them and invited them to have a drink. But they refused. No, they said, we don't drink wine because our ancestor Jonadab, son of Rechab, gave us this command.

[4 : 10] You and your descendants must never drink wine and do not build houses or plant crops or vineyards, but always live in tents.

If you follow these commands, you will live long and good lives in the land. So we have obeyed him in all these things. We have never had a drink of wine to this day, nor have our wives, our sons or our daughters.

We haven't built houses or owned vineyards or farms or planted crops. We have lived in tents and have fully obeyed all the commands of Jonadab, our ancestor.

But when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked the country, we were afraid of the Babylonian and Syrian armies. So we decided to move to Jerusalem.

That is why we are here. So probably many of you have not heard about the Rechabites before. And I could compare them to our modern day Amish.

[5 : 15] They were a small, tight-knit religious sect with highly specific standards for behavior. They essentially took this idea of remaining separate from the world seriously.

And this had real-world consequences for how they lived together. They rejected anything that reeked of the fertility gods of the Babylonian Empire, which included things like cultivating land, making or drinking wine, building houses.

And they refused to participate in what they saw as the injustice of the economic systems of their time. And we hear about the Rechabites because Jeremiah decides to put them to the test.

He invites them into the Lord's temple, which is a sacred space, and he invites them to drink wine. And they refuse. This refusal tells us so much about what it means to live out our faith in a time when the ground beneath our feet feels like it will splinter at any second.

And the Rechabites matter to us today because they are masters of rooted improvisation. And as a value of the table church, rooted improvisation is all about honoring the wisdoms and traditions of those that have come before while adapting and responding to the needs and challenges of our time.

[6 : 47] And the Rechabites were radical because they remained rooted to their convictions. Eugene Peterson, in his book, *Run with the Horses*, the quest for life at its best, talks about why Jeremiah used the Rechabites as an example.

The Rechabites were living evidence, right on the crowded streets of Jerusalem, of the two things the crowd-conditioned people assumed were impossible.

They were evidence that every day, ordinary people could live their entire lives directed by a personal command and not the impersonal pressures of the crowd.

And they were evidence that it is possible to maintain a distinctive way of life and not assimilate to the fashions of the crowd. And so that makes me wonder, as a church, what are we willing to go against the crowd for?

How do we remain committed to our values and our practices? What remains essential about the traditions that have been passed down to us?

[8 : 07] And what keeps us rooted in our identity? And the Rechabites were also important because they were willing to improvise.

After they denied the wine in front of Jeremiah, they talk about how they moved to Jerusalem because of the impending threat of Babylon. They recognized that their nomadic way of life, living in tents, needed to adapt to keep their community safe.

They obeyed the command not to build houses, but they reinterpreted their faith for the changing times by moving into the city.

And I think this is great news for any of us who are wondering what it means to act faithfully without replicating the past. Many of us in this room know what it is like to recognize that the tents of our faith are no longer sufficient to keep us safe.

And the spiritual practices that used to ground us can so often feel like a way to deliver us back into shame and uncertainty. But this passage gives us the freedom to imagine other ways, more abundant ways, to reach out and connect to God and to each other.

[9 : 30] There are so many ways to follow God's will. What worked for us at one time might not work for us at another. We don't need to do things the same way we've done them in the past, just because that's what we've done in the past.

And now, I do not think that Jeremiah wanted us to drop everything and act just like the Rechabites. But I do think that we can learn to honor and celebrate them for being, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., transformed nonconformists.

In one of his most popular quotes, he writes, This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists.

Our planet teeters on the brink of atomic annihilation. Dangerous passions of pride, hatred, and selfishness are enthroned in our lives.

[10 : 34] Truth lies prostrate on the rugged hills of named Calvaries. And men do reverence before false gods of nationalism and materialism.

The saving of our world from pending doom will come not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority.

Now, a couple of weeks ago, Pastor Ternetta talked about how MLK so accurately predicted so many of our current and persisting evils, and how he identified the urge to assimilate, to remain silent, to accept the status quo.

And I wonder what it might look like for the table church to live into this identity of transformed nonconformists. And it is difficult, because considering the full weight of the injustice in our world can be overwhelming, numbing even.

I think about Martin Luther King's long list of atomic annihilation, worship of nationalism and materialism, dangerous passions of pride and selfishness.

[11 : 59] And not much has changed in that regard. And we can add contemporary evils to this list, from the murder of innocents across the globe, from our own cities to the ruins of Gaza, the systemic exploitation in Sudan and Congo, the everyday violence of people who don't have a place to call home, or enough food to eat.

And part of being creatively maladjusted is their willingness to remain sensitive to those evils. The Rechabites set themselves apart from the injustices of their own society, and they were willing to stand firm in those convictions.

And so our challenge today is not allowing our endless doom-scrolling or 24-7 news cycles to lull us into becoming one of the conforming majorities, or the crowds who only seek to keep the peace.

But Jeremiah urges us further than this idea of a no into the idea of a yes. So we'll pick up the story again in Jeremiah 35, verse 12.

Then the Lord gave this message to Jeremiah. This is what the Lord of heaven's armies, the God of Israel, says.

[13 : 25] Go and say to the people in Judah and Jerusalem, come and learn a lesson about how to obey me. The Rechabites do not drink wine to this day, because their ancestor Jonadab told them not to.

But I have spoken to you again and again, and you refuse to listen to me, to obey me. Time after time I sent you prophets who told you, turn from your wicked ways and start doing things right.

Stop worshiping other gods, so that you might live in peace here in the land that I have given to you and your ancestors. But you would not listen to me or obey me.

The descendants of Jonadab, son of Rechab, have obeyed their ancestor completely, but you have refused to listen to me. Jeremiah's main point is this.

If the Rechabites can obey the word of one of their ancestors for decades, then God asks, why can you not obey me? Now, for those of us who have grown up in kind of like a very legalistic religious culture, this can seem a bit combative and stern even.

[14 : 50] But I always come back to this metaphor of a parent who reaches out to instruct their child on the way to go, but they refuse to listen.

There is pain, there is grief, there is hurt, but there is also a deep love that leads the parent to reach out to their child one last time and say, won't you listen to me?

I only want what's best for you. But God is calling us into something beyond just mere abstinence or separating ourselves from the world.

The Rechabites were experts at saying no to living in houses, to not drinking wine, to refusing to participate in the systems of injustice around them.

But we are invited to go beyond abstinence into a positive doing. One of my absolute favorite books, Martyr by Kava Akbar, sums this up.

[15 : 57] This book explores the nature of martyrdom and what makes a life worth living. But he also explores this idea of what it means to not merely refrain from evil, but to actually do good.

Eight of the Ten Commandments are about what thou shalt not. You can live a whole life not doing any of that stuff and still avoid doing any good.

That's the whole crisis. The rot at the root of everything. The belief that goodness is built in a constructed absence, not doing.

That belief corrupts everything, has everyone with any power sitting on their hands. A rich man goes a whole day without killing a single homeless person and so goes to sleep content in his goodness.

In another world, he's buying crates of socks and cliff bars and tents, distributing them in city centers. But for him, abstinence reigns.

[17 : 14] So I think that Jeremiah rightfully praised the Rechabites for their steadfast commitment to the commanded life. But he also recognizes that God is calling us beyond that, calling us to listen to what God truly has for us.

And so the Hebrew word used for listen in this passage is shema. And this is also the word for the central prayer that formed the basis of the Israelites' life together.

In Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 through 6, the command is this. Listen, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourself wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today.

So the central command of Moses' law is about love. To critique the Akbar quote a little bit, the Ten Commandments don't boil down to a thou shalt not, but thou shall.

[18 : 40] And Jesus perfectly summarizes this idea in Matthew chapter 22, verses 37 through 40. when one of the Pharisees asked him about the most important commandment.

Jesus replied, you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important. Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.

These commandments move us into an active practice of showing love for God, for one another, for ourselves, and for creation.

The command in life is not about depriving ourselves from something, but about opening ourselves up. As Akbar says, we can spend our entire lives refraining from drinking, swearing, having premarital sex, et cetera, and still wonder if we made any tangible difference at all.

[20 : 03] And for so many of us, we were taught that we needed to change certain things about ourselves in order to be worthy of God's love. love. It was about chiseling away anything that was not from God.

But what might it look like for us to embody the love that has been ours from the beginning? I think for many of us, a starting point has always been this idea of loving our neighbor.

For example, when I was thinking through this passage, I immediately thought of Isaiah 58 verses 6 through 9. But as I read it, I want you to consider and focus on what God is truly asking us to say yes to.

this is the kind of fasting I want. Free those who are wrongly imprisoned.

Lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless.

[21 : 19] Give clothes to those who need them and do not hide from relatives who need your help. Then your salvation will come like the dawn and your wounds will quickly heal.

Your godliness will lead you forward and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Then when you call, the Lord will answer.

Yes, I am here. He will quickly reply. When I consider this passage, it kind of encourages me to, or it makes me zoom out to the full scope of injustice in the world.

And sometimes, as I mentioned before, it feels hard to keep paying attention, to keep bearing witness. things. But we never had to do everything on this list, like God is waiting on our deliverable. We can start small. And for me, that looks like committing myself to speaking the truth whenever I step on this stage. It looks also like advocating for my un-house neighbors through spreading awareness and building community at my day job, which provides medical care for people experiencing homelessness.

[22 : 44] And so I want to name that many of us are already showing up in this way, that we are already thinking of ways to chill up for our neighbors, to show love, to make a difference.

And the word of encouragement I have for you today is to just keep going. But we can't sustain this work without going back to the original commandment.

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind. As a church, as individuals, we focus a lot on this idea of standing up for a fellow neighbor, not only talking the talk, but walking the walk.

work. But often, God can seem like an addendum to that work, or a way to recharge so that we can keep sacrificing ourselves for the cause.

But the commanded life is ultimately above, is ultimately about falling back in love with the God of our youth, the God who made us from the beginning.

[24 : 03] Isaiah reminds us that if we call out to God, God will answer, here I am. We return to God, not because we're afraid of disobeying God, or because he's some caffeine jolt that we need to keep going in our daily lives, but because God provides us with living water that will never run dry.

Perhaps before or as we focus on bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice, we root ourselves in the fact that God has said yes to us from the start, and God longs for us to say a yes in return.

So, to close, I just want to leave us with one simple question. how can you say yes to falling back in love with God this week?

One simple way to begin might be to reflect on a characteristic of God that has felt meaningful to you. For example, maybe the idea of God as father has always felt fraught and dangerous, but the idea of God as mother feels healing in some way.

Or maybe it's the idea of God as protector, or restorer, or friend. Whatever it is, just name the one thing that keeps drawing you back in, that thing that urged you into coming into this space, searching for an encounter with God.

[25 : 52] For me, saying yes to God has looked like practicing rest when everything around me keeps trying to get me to just add that one more thing to my to-do list, to keep going and sacrificing myself for the work, but knowing that God has only required me to love and be loved in return.

For you, rediscovering your enchantment with God might be dusting off one of those old spiritual practices, things like journaling or taking a healing walk in nature without any distractions, just you and God.

And if you find that love for your neighbor and seeking justice is more tangible to you today, I invite you to just simply ask, what is it about this person that reveals the heart of God?

How is God showing up in this space? The God who called you to justice is also yearning for you to recognize that God is with you in this fight, that God's heart breaks for what breaks your heart, and God sustains you through it all.

Or maybe your step is simpler, to just close your eyes, take a moment of stillness, and say, Lord, here I am.

[27 : 34] And from there, I pray that a million ways to say yes to God can emerge to chart a path forward. In a time when everything seems shaky, may you fall back in love with the God who is always a firm foundation.

Would you pray with me? Lord, here I am, here we are, in this space where there is so much bearing down on us, so many responsibilities, so many shoulds and should nots, so many fears that we're not measuring up, that we're not doing enough, that there is something that we are missing, that the world that we have is not the world that we want.

It is heavy. And I pray that as we continue on with our service and enter into the week, that you will just come forth and show your presence to us in those small ways that added up make a big difference.

For those of us who have maybe struggled with this idea of connecting with God, of falling back in love with you, may you show us just that one tiny glimmer that reveals that you are here, that you weep with us, that you celebrate with us, that you are calling us into a deeper relationship.

May we never lose that enchantment with you, and may that sustain us through all that happens in our lives. In Jesus' name, amen.