

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
January 23, 2011
Matthew 4:12-23

Epiphany 3, Year A

I love watching improv comedy for the simple reason that it's fun. Improv comedy has no script, no monologue that is memorized ahead of time. A comedy troupe gets ideas from the audience and from each other as the performance is happening, and the funniest parts are the parts that just pop into their heads! Oddly enough, right underneath the laughter, there is also a level of terror. After all, being on stage and not knowing any of your lines is the sort of thing people have nightmares about. Being exposed to public ridicule is one of the deepest human fears, and something normal people work very hard to avoid.

But ironically, I think that the element of fear increases rather than decreases the level of fun. There is something exciting about people who face our worst fears and overcome them. It's why people like to watch Olympic ski jumpers, or acrobats, or race car drivers. It is why we were so touched the first time we saw Susan Boyle sing. It is why we get so attached to James Bond.

That kind of courage and undaunted high spirits and joy were what appealed to me about this congregation right from the get-go, and the qualities I still dearly love in you all.

Another paradox about improve comedy is that the people who are really good at that kind of split-second humor have invested a lot of time in working on their skills. Like the skiers, the acrobats, and the people who want to get to Carnegie Hall, it's practice, practice, practice. Ironically, spontaneity takes preparation.

The foundational skill in preparing for improv comedy is learning to say "yes and." In a commencement speech at Knox College, Stephen Colbert describes it: "When I was starting out in Chicago, doing improvisational theatre with Second City and other places, there was really only one rule I was taught about improv. That was, "yes-and." In this case, "yes-and" is a verb. To "yes-and." I yes-and, you yes-and, he, she or it yes-and. And yes-anding means that when you go onstage to improvise a scene with no script, you have no idea what's going to happen, maybe with someone you've never met before. To build a scene, you have to accept. To build anything onstage, you have to accept what the

other improviser initiates on stage. They say you're doctors—you're doctors. And then, you add to that: We're doctors and we're trapped in an ice cave. That's the "-and." And then hopefully they "yes-and" you back. You have to keep your eyes open when you do this. You have to be aware of what the other performer is offering you, so that you can agree and add to it. And through these agreements, you can improvise a scene or a one-act play. By following each other's lead, neither of you are really in control. It's more of a mutual discovery than a solo adventure. What happens in a scene is often as much a surprise to you as it is to the audience."

Colbert tells the graduates, "Well, you are about to start the greatest improvisation of all. With no script. No idea what's going to happen, often with people and places you have never seen before. And you are not in control. So say "yes." And if you're lucky, you'll find people who will say "yes" back. Now will saying "yes" get you in trouble at times? Will saying "yes" lead you to doing some foolish things? Yes it will. But don't be afraid to be a fool. Young people who pretend to be wise to the ways of the world are mostly just cynics. Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say no. But saying "yes" begins things. Saying "yes" is how things grow. Saying "yes" leads to knowledge. So for as long as you have the strength to, say "yes.""

Colbert is right, of course, and not just for graduates, but for all of us. We can say no to what we are given, or complain that it should have been different, or reject it because it wasn't what we expected. There are all sorts of ways of saying no. An insult is one way to say no. Ending a relationship says no. Killing someone becomes the most extreme form of saying no. Saying no feels like having control, but in reality it crushes possibilities for a better future.

Saying yes involves accepting the situation you have, whether or not it is a situation you would have chosen, and adding something that enables you to move forward with it, together with others. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Heathsville has lived the "yes and" approach to life. Four years ago this congregation had no building, no priest, no prayer books, not even so much as a stapler; in fact, nothing but God and each other. So you said, "**yes**, this is the situation we're in, **and** we're going to improvise

a parish from what we've got." And you did! The Methodist Church improvised with you to let you worship in their building, and other Episcopal Churches donated hymnals, prayer books, money, and all sorts of supplies. Hal came in to serve as your interim rector. Together, you improvised a mission and vision statement. You improvised new outreach to the local community, including delivering water to people in the area whose wells had run dry or become contaminated, and who had no clean drinking water. You improvised the St. Stephen's Oysters and Oldies, and the Bluegrass & Barbecue as fundraisers for outreach to those in need in our the community. You rented a dilapidated house and fixed it up to use as office space, meeting space, and space for weekly dinners. I joined you on this journey as your priest; we improvise together as we go along. Later you expanded the house so you could begin to use it as an improvised worship space. Most important of all, you improvised a new form of faith, in which trusting God through an uncertain future, when it would have been so much easier to give up and go home, provided opportunities for new growth, new hope, new creativity, new joy. New people from our local area have continued to come join this congregation and improvise along with us. On Thursday night, in our Welcome to the Episcopal Church series, one of our newcomers asked, "How did you manage to do all this? Did you put it into words?" And immediately three different parishioners' arms rose and pointed to the mission and vision statement on our wall.

How? Well, you have God and each other, so you just do it.

People are sometimes skeptical when they come across accounts like the one in today's gospel reading:

"As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him."

How could it happen like that? They just leave behind everything that's familiar to them, even their father? They just drop everything and go because it's what they believe? Just two brothers, and then they discover two other brothers, and then there are twelve, and then more followers come along too. Could it really happen just like that? Yes! The

more time I spend with this congregation, the more strongly I believe in miracles. They have Jesus and they have each other. So they face their fears of the unknown and overcome them. As today's psalm puts it,

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?

If we dwell on our fears about the future, they can paralyze us. One of the reasons that improv comedy is fast, is that the speed turns off our mental worrywart. When you're doing improv comedy, you have to respond instantly, you have to be "in the moment" and the result is that you don't have time to agonize over "should I say that?" "will that be funny?" "what will my mother think?" You just blurt out whatever pops into your head, and sometimes it's goofy, and sometimes it's brilliant. Not allowing time for worry or fear frees up your creativity.

The word "immediately" comes up twice in today's reading. "Immediately" often comes up in the Gospel of Matthew. If you read the Gospel of Matthew from beginning to end in one sitting, it has an amazingly energetic pace. People in this gospel don't sit around worrying or deliberating over a cost-benefit analysis; they see the right thing to do and they just do it. Jesus says "follow me" They say "yes" **and** they start fishing for people. It's improv with Jesus.

God is different from an improv actor because God is not limited by time: God sees the big picture, the future as well as the past and the present, and God cares for and guides them all. Still, from our human perspective, God has a lot in common with an improv actor too, because God keeps tossing us the unexpected. When we go with the "yes and" is when miracles often happen, as God gets creative with us.

The reason that "yes and" is so important is that in an improv troupe, the yes ands build the scene and create the humor. One "no" can kill the whole scene. The real danger in improv isn't having people laugh at you: having people laugh at you is actually the purpose of the whole thing. They're laughing with you. It's fun. The real danger in improv is that you'll be so afraid of making a mistake that you will make the biggest

mistake of all: you won't make anything, and you'll prevent everyone else from making anything too.

The scriptural narratives that are improv with God turn out to be almost all of them. There are some actors who say no to God. They want to stay in control. Jonah says no. Pharaoh says no. The rich young ruler says no. Judas says no. Pilate says no. But the exciting stories in scripture involve the people who say "yes" to God.

Stephen Colbert tells us "You are not in control. So say "yes." And if you're lucky, you'll find people who will say "yes" back."

In our worship this morning, we know that there is something even better: God will say "yes" back.

The Bible is a comedy in the original meaning of the word: a story with a happy ending. When humanity answers Jesus with the complete no in the crucifixion, Jesus accepts that. In the crucifixion Jesus says "yes." The resurrection is Jesus' "and." Jesus invites us into that resurrection life with him. It is scary to respond to that invitation with "yes and." It is also exciting. And sometimes even fun!