

Series: *STAPLES*—November 15, 2009

THE COURAGE TO SAY YES... WHEN YOU NEED TO SAY YES!

Luke 1:26-38

1. How many of you *love* a lot of choices—like you see a menu with 200 different things on it as a form of culinary artistic expression? How many of you *hate* choosing—in fact, even the KFC menu gives you a headache?

-If you hate choosing, this is the wrong time to be alive. We have more choices today than *any* civilization that has ever existed on the face of the earth. In the average supermarket—like Loblaw's—there are between 25 and 30,000 options on what to buy. The yogurt section alone is confusing. Did you know that there are 16,800 different makes and models of automobiles in North America alone--with 25 million different options when everything is taken into consideration?!

-The number of choices in every arena of life are staggering. Alvin Toffler is quoted as saying, "We are clearly racing toward *over-choice!*"

- a. Our parents tried valiantly to teach us to make good choices—because they knew that, over time, your choices make you. Choices shape your life—and sometimes your body if you like Tim Horton's donuts! A lot of our choices are not life-changing. But some choices are like a funnel. They close doors and narrow your options right down to a tiny exit hole.
- b. Some years ago, I started praying for my children along these lines, "God, help them to have the courage to say *no* when they need to say *no*, and to have the courage to stand up and say *yes* when they need to say *yes*." Why? Because that's what making good choices boils down to. Because I knew that kids, in a *very* short window of time, can make choices that funnel their lives down to a very small hole.

-Decisions are funny things. Sometimes—to make *no* decision—actually makes the decision for you. Like if your car is stalled on the railroad tracks and a train is coming. **No** decision is not good!

-There are places in life where one painful but solid **NO** says 'yes' to a world of fantastic options.

-There are some places in life where too many *yeses* to insignificant things—says *no* to something that *really* matters.

-And there are some places in life where it takes *tremendous* courage to say *yes*—but that *yes* opens the door to a life of meaning and significance.

2. We'll moving into the Christmas season soon—a time when a woman named Mary will be forever remembered for playing a *huge* role in the whole drama of the redemption of this planet. She was probably only about 14 at the time, unmarried—living in borderline poverty in this boring small town. Pause for a moment—that is precisely the place where guys and girls her age sometimes either make *really* good decisions—or *disastrous* decisions.

-Well, Mary is just going about her normal life when, one day, an angel shows up and calls her to a greater mission than she *ever* expected. Let me read it for you:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 1:26-37 NLT)

- a. It would be hard to actually over-estimate the price-tag on this calling. To be pregnant *before* marriage in that culture was to shame your entire family, your fiancé—and your fiancé's family. In a small town? It would certainly mean ostracism and maybe even death by stoning.

-To be poor, a woman, and voted off the island because of a perceived illegitimate pregnancy was not just shameful—it was *worse* than death. How would you *ever* convince your friends, "No, really! God made me pregnant and this baby is the Jewish Messiah!" You can see the anguish and confusion hidden in the words of this account, "But...I'm a *virgin!?*". And yet...read on:

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her. (Luke 1:38 NLT)

Mary, at 14, had the courage to say *yes* when she needed to say *yes*—and her life became legendary. Her *yes* made her one of the greatest women who have ever walked this planet.

- b. What you see through the Bible is a whole *series* of yeses that changed history.
 - *God asked a man named Noah to single-handedly build a monstrosity of a ship—450 feet long!

*God asked a man named Abraham to leave the most advanced culture in the world of that day—and go to the desert and start a nation. At *75!*

*God asked Moses to go back to the place where wanted posters with his picture still hung in all the post offices—and confront the most powerful leader of his day.

*A woman named Esther, chosen as eye-candy for the party boy ruler of the world of that day, was called by God to lay her life on the line for the lives of her people

- c. But there was a **yes** said long ago that preceded all of these. At one juncture, back in the eons of eternity, a God who knew the future as precisely as we know the present—decided to create humans in his image—with a massive built in risk factor: the capacity to say **NO! No** to truth. **No** to life. **No** to Him. **No** to every opportunity to do right. **No** to every rescue attempt—and every attempt to redeem and restore. **No** to creation, to health and to eternal life. Knowing precisely what would happen, God said... **Yes!** To **us!**

*But that meant **another yes**. He knew that our **no** to Him would wreck us and wreck the planet—creating massive damage and loss. **Someone** powerful enough to make things new would have to come, show a new way, and give his life as a sacrifice. It would take an **insider** with the perspective and power of an **outsider**. Someone would have to say **yes** to a messy, degrading, humbling and painful mission of reclaiming what had been squandered and lost. And the **Son** said... **Yes!**

*But then it was Mary's turn. And her courageous **Yes!** to God's plan—and Jesus' **Yes!** to the cross started a makeover of human lives and hearts and kingdoms and institutions that is **still** going on. And God is **still** looking for people to say **Yes!**

3. Sometimes we get all sentimental about Mary and baby Jesus—and forget that their initial **yes** was the first in a series of hard **yeses**. With all due respect, I would be surprised if Mary truly knew what her **yes** would mean. Her **yes** meant hiding in Egypt from a paranoid king; it meant moving back to the very town where her name had gotten tainted; it meant watching her other children reject the Son she had carried as a Virgin.

-She was warned about this. When she and Joseph went to dedicate Jesus at the Temple, an old prophet, Simeon, told her that this 8 day old baby, Jesus, would grow up to create **huge** controversy; and that a sword would pierce **her** soul. I'm sure she thought, "What have I gotten myself into?" But the only way forward is by saying **yes**. She ultimately had to say **Yes** to following and obeying and worshipping this child of hers that she'd nursed, changed and taught to talk.

-Jesus, Son of God, had to say **yes** too. **Yes** to the Father. **Yes** to what He knew would be a treacherous, lethal path. And Jesus agonized over his final **yes** in Gethsemane—to the point where prayed for hours, cried, sweat blood. He said, "Father, is there **some other way?** But—not **my** will, **Your** will be done!" **Yes** meant humiliation, death—looking, initially, like all the other Messiah wannabes. A failure. -You realize, don't you, that saying **yes** to almost anything is the first in a series of **yeses**.

- a. For example. Saying yes to becoming a hockey player is not just becoming the glitzy star you always dreamed you would be. It means saying **yes** to

equipment that can be quite expensive. It means saying **yes** to practices at ungodly hours of the day when you'd rather do **anything** than be on ice. It means exercise; criticism; sitting on the bench; being away from home; driving through snow-storms. I mean, saying **yes** to hockey doesn't necessarily mean you'll be the star of **anything**.

- b. Getting married seems so glamorous. Really. Standing in front of a group of envious friends in a \$4000 dress—or a **rented** suit, having a ring slipped onto your finger, and then when the minister asks, “Will you take **this** woman...**this** man...to be your wedded spouse...?” Yes, yes—**yes! Of course, YES!** -Well, that question includes a **whole** daunting list of other yeses. Yes to humbly mumbling, “I was wrong and you were right.” Saying yes means saying **no** to **all** the other options that come along—that, on some days, seem much more attractive. Saying yes means compromising when you really, **really** don't feel like compromising! Saying yes sometimes means vacationing in Timmons when you dreamed of Bermuda.

Saying yes means talking when you'd rather sleep—or grunt. See, we don't **realize** it at the time, but it takes courage—guts—to say yes when you **need** to say yes! And it takes courage to **keep** saying **yes** when you need to **keep** saying yes.

-Jesus said, “Let your yes, be **yes**—and your no be **no**. In other words, truly saying **yes** means making the sacrifices necessary to **live out that yes**. This is my point. The **right** yeses in life are usually uphill—not downstream. They take courage. In fact, Jesus told people, “If you're going to say **yes** to me, you'd better **count the cost!**”

4. Would it be helpful to talk about some places where you and I need to give a resounding **yes**?

- a. It starts with Jesus. Jesus said **yes** to God's mission of redeeming, restoring and renewing **all** creation. His **yes** to the cross cost Him **everything**. And He offers to bring us under His leadership and grace and truth—and use us to accomplish His plan.

-Our **yes** to Jesus is and what He's done for us is not just a choice to find life and forgiveness and grace—it is a choice to **follow** Jesus. It means living under **His** leadership. In every kingdom—there is a King. And the King is in charge—of **everything**.

-When the Disciples said **Yes** to following Jesus—they really hadn't believed in Him yet. But there was enough evidence for Him being Someone incredibly pure and powerful—that they laid everything on the line for Him. And, over time, they were witnesses to everything He said, every challenge He gave—for people to say **Yes**. In fact they heard and memorized words like these:

Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to

hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels.” (Luke 9:23-26 NLT)

-Each time they heard Jesus say things like this, they had to decide, “Is my answer to Jesus and His Kingdom *still* “yes”? When they saw Jesus being tortured and nailed to the cross to die, His words, *take up your cross daily and follow me* must’ve echoed through their heads—and they had to decide, “Is my answer still *yes*?”

-And you know what Jesus said, too. Have you ever had the courage to say to Jesus, “Yes, I’ll *follow* you!” If you did—is your answer *still* yes?

- b. There’s another *yes* Jesus calls us to that’s implicit in this one. It’s saying *yes* to the transforming work of the Spirit. If you’ve chosen to follow Jesus, the *only* way you can be reborn into this new Kingdom is through the Spirit. Your body, your life becomes His home. Now, the Holy Spirit is a person—you can’t just have part of Him.

-You have *all* of Him; the question is—does He have *all* of you? Cause that’s what He’ll draw your heart toward. For Him to do the work He wants and needs to do in you—even to give you courage for future *yeses*—He needs for you and me to turn over our lives to Him. *All* of them. If we want to be like Jesus—which is our destiny—there’s no other way.

-We tend to think, “Hey, wait a minute. That’s like giving God a blank check! Do you just expect me to hand my life over to Him?” Yes, that would basically be the point! Let me ask you a question. Is there an area of your life where you really don’t *need* the power and influence of the Holy Spirit? He’s Lord of all—and everything *outside* of His Lordship is vulnerable to attack. *That* is the reality of pushing the Spirit away. He waits for us to invite Him in when He knocks. And *that* is the place where you and I need to have the courage to say *Yes*.

- c. There is another place where you and I need the courage to say *yes*—and it’s to Jesus’ mission. Some of you are thinking, “Yep, I knew it. *Here it comes—the big plug to do something on Sunday!*” And that’s specifically what I’m *not* talking about. Think bigger. Think way *way* bigger.

-God’s mission on this planet is to redeem, reclaim, and renew everything. He can and will use *all* we do in our lives to make that a reality. Remember the prayer Jesus taught? *Your* Kingdom come and *Your* will be done, here on earth—like it is in Heaven all the time. What does that leave out? Nothing, right?

-Think about what Monday through Saturday looks like in your life. What if God were to say to you, “That’s *your* mission—to be Good News where you are,

Monday through Saturday. Whether that's at the Roger's Center, Loblaws, a university classroom, public school—or some steel and glass building downtown. God has called his people to live out the Good News, peace, grace and love Jesus came to bring this world. To love and bless it's people. To have an renewing influence on all creation. To serve those who live in poverty and oppression. And, when we have the opportunity, to talk about the transforming power of Jesus in the human heart. *That's our excuse for loving and giving.*

-That mission is way, *way* too big for one person—or even a group of people this size. But if this sleeping giant called the Church of Jesus ever gets unleashed—and we fully understand the power of the Spirit in us? It's an unstoppable force! And we are either a part of our world's renewal—or its decay—every day. **That's** what you and I have been called to and given power to be a part of.

-Have you ever said *yes* to the mission of Jesus—right where you are? In your neighborhood. In the soccer team or hockey team you coach—or play on. In your home? With your friends. See, God is at work *everywhere*—and in every heart—on every square inch of this planet. Do we serve others here in this church? Of course—every gathering is a joint effort. But the *real* action is *right where you are!* Have you ever had the courage to say *yes* to your calling? To do what Jesus did—live, love—be a servant of the Most High God who blesses the people in your sphere of influence?

- d. There's another place where I think we need the courage to say *yes*. It's loving, giving and sacrificing to help those in our world—in fact, right here in our city—who are *without*. Without food. Without shelter. Without an advocate who will give them a voice. Without dignity. Without proper water. Without medical care. Without hope.

-Think about what God would want to do on behalf of those in our world who suffer. Who get treated as an inconvenience. Who get shoved to the side. Who live without dignity. Someone needs to have the courage to say *yes* to them. Whether that means supporting them for a time, helping them to find shelter. Giving them what they need to get into a place where they can do good work and be adequately paid. We are called, by Jesus, to be those who say *yes*.

-No one person—or 10 persons—or 1000 persons can do it all. But if all of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus—would say, *yes!*—just imagine what could happen. People have the courage to say *yes*—one at a time. Will *you* be one of them? Please don't get me wrong; this isn't social action to replace the Good News of Jesus. Social action is one arm of the Gospel; the Good News, the saving grace of Jesus is the other arm—and it takes two arms to complete the hug!

-It's very simple. Jesus calls us—you and me, with all our flaws and hang-ups to say—*Yes!* to what He's up to here. I want you to think about that for a

minute. If it's what *God* is up to—like His mission, His main thing—and He's at work *everywhere* in *everything*—then why *would* we want to be doing something else? Why wouldn't we say yes—when we only have *one* life; *one* shot at things?

5. Let me talk about something really important here. Our *motives* for saying *No...* or *Yes*. Religious people have always been *famous* for their lists of things to *not* to—and to *do*. And sometimes we say *No* or *Yes*—because it's part of the entrance exam. It's what *spiritual people do*. It's at this intersection where our love for Jesus and others sometimes gets contaminated by our need to be noticed and admired and significant. Sometimes it becomes part of our inner need for a score card; to judge others to make ourselves feel more spiritual.

-And this stuff is junk. It contaminates our hearts. We can find ourselves saying *No* to a bunch of things or *Yes* to a bunch of things—not as an expression of love for God and others--but out of obligation—or because we want to be cool or seen as spiritual, or noble, or *right*.

- a. This is *exactly* what Jesus is getting at in the Sermon on the Mount when he says:

Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1, 3-4 NLT)

-What Jesus is saying is *very* clear. What you do, what you give, when you say *yes* is a private deal between you and God. If good deeds get contaminated by a need to let others know about them so that you can be noticed or admired--t it--to be noticed, admired and followed—you've *totally missed the point!* Jesus goes on to speak to the things we say *no* to.

“And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. (Matthew 6:16 NLT)

- b. According to Jesus, the *only* motivation that's acceptable is love. Love for God, and love for others. Bring love for yourself into that mix, and it gets ugly. Twisted. This is what the early leader, Paul, is talking about when he warns the Corinthian believers:

If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:3 NLT)

-Apparently it's possible, with our *yesses*, to make unbelievable sacrifices—and miss the point—and miss the reward for doing it. Anyone here remember Evel Knievel? Doing sacrificial things—*good* things—publicly would be the same as him doing risky stunts to impress *an audience*. Except he's more honest; he admits it.

- c. See, the deal is that asceticism—living a harsh life, doing without for the sake of doing without is *always* impressive in religious settings. And it can give you a certain amount of leverage with those who are impressed. Paul, the Apostle, speaks to this:

Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud...These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires. (Colossians 3:18, 23 NLT)

-Every religion has a form of asceticism to it—thinking that God is pleased by the severity of our lives. But, according to Jesus, the reason why we say *Yes!* and *No!* is always—*always* as an act of love for God—and for the people He loves. There is always a purpose—and it has a face on it; a soul in it. Making it about some ego need we have, or our need to have a little group of admirers totally corrupts it.

6. Most of us, when it's all said and done, will wish that we had said *yes* more, don't you think? Sometimes we can't say *yes* because we have never created space to say *yes*. I think saying *no* when you need to say *no—may* be what creates space to say *yes*. I heard a pastor tell a story about a couple that came to him for financial advice about their *dream* home. It would cost a lot—but they figured that if they cut some corners—**they could have it!** He asked them, "So, are you buying a home...or a **prison?**" Sometimes all the yeses we say tie up our time, resources, and energy with force us to say *no* to the things that really, *really* count.

- a. We live in a world where the advertising is always pushing, always urging and coercing, "Say *yes!* Say yes to the new car, the new computer, the clothes, the I-pod, the dinner out, the bigger house, the..." and the list is endless.
-Our culture does the same thing. We are told that if our kids aren't in every enriching activity possible we are depriving them. My point is that if we listen to all these voices telling us what we *need*, there will be nothing left—no time, money or energy--to say *yes* to what God is up to in meeting that most desperate needs on this planet. See, you can't spend everything you have on your family and yourself—and have something left to give back.
- b. Saying *yes* as a loving response to God and others requires margin that can *only* be created by saying *no!*

7. I think there are areas of life where *I* need the courage to say *Yes*—because it's right, because it's part of my decision to follow Jesus—and because it fulfills my calling to love God with all my heart and soul and strength and mind—and to love others *as I love myself*. It's possible that there are some areas where you need to have the courage to say yes.

*It could be that before we can say *yes*, we need to say *no*. *No* to more. *No* to some lesser opportunities. *No* to movin' on up. *No* to the need to be noticed and admired. *No* to the wrong dream for life so we can say *Yes* to the right dream.

*It could be this morning that you need the courage to say *Yes* to loving someone you haven't been loving as you should. You *really* need to say YES.

*It could be this morning that God's been speaking to you about forgiving someone—and you need to say *Yes*. Drop the list of charges

*It could be that you need the courage to say *Yes* to going to someone else, humbling yourself, and just making things right.

*And it could be, this morning, that you need to say *Yes* to Jesus, to His Spirit, to His calling—because you never have. And *today* is the day.

*It could be that you need to have the courage to say *Yes* to an opportunity that is scaring you have to death. It will cost you dearly—but the cost of *not* saying 'yes' is infinitely higher. Your model is Mary—this gutsy young teenage girl who, when presented with an opportunity—and a challenge that would flip her life upside down, said the incredible words, *May it be to me as you have said!*

Q & A

8. I want to close with an exercise this morning that you might find helpful. I want to ask five people to come up and help me.

-Imagine that you're a family. Hold hands and stand in a circle facing each other. In this context—in your home, what would you see that you need to say *yes* to. Now, face *outward*. What would you see from this perspective?

-Let's add five more—and pretend we're The Olive Branch—and do the same exercise. Face in—and face out. The inside things are the realities of everyday life—but it's in facing *out*—that the opportunities come!

-I heard a saying recently—that God is found in *time*—which is *eternity in disguise*. Choice is an amazing gift. We have one life—and our choices either expand it—or squeeze it. Which end of the funnel are you aiming for?