

It's Not About You

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

June 5, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Genesis 3:1-7

Mark 8:27-9:1

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

We begin, this morning, in the beginning: with Eve, the serpent and some bad theology—what David Brooks this week called “baby-boomer theology”—that sets us up, still to this day, for the fall. The writer of the second creation story, as if to give every succeeding generation a “Heads up!” concerning the story’s bad theology, begins with a warning: the serpent is the wiliest of all God’s wild animals. To wit: the serpent is the creature Peter will supplant centuries later lest he be asked by Jesus to follow something other than his bliss. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Back to the beginning!

In the third of Genesis, a question is posed: What exactly did God say? An answer is given: God said thus and so. Then, in response to God’s word, an interpretation is offered, an interpretation that invites human beings to become the “autonomous, self-governing, self-sufficient” creatures [Barth] they are capable of being. And what, you ask, would be wrong with this? In fact, is not everything *right* with this? The human enterprise is nothing if it is not first a seeking after and then becoming our own unique selves, pursuing what will bring us personal fulfillment, setting goals that are *our* chosen goals, following the bliss that makes us grateful to be alive. Put another way, from the beginning, as we become aware of our own needs and our growing ability to satisfy them, the tree that was once forbidden is now not only useful--good for food--but also elegant--a delight to the eyes--and is to be desired to make human beings wise. We would be foolish *not* to eat of it. This, said the 16th century Reformer Phillip Melanchthon, is the intoxicating certainty that by asserting our autonomy, we are “seeing and doing the real will of God.”

On the fifth of June, in a culture awash with things to be desired, a society populated by autonomous individuals, the third of Genesis brings to mind another beginning, a commencement played out on the football fields of high schools and the campuses of higher learning across the land. There, writes David Brooks in Tuesday’s New York Times, graduates are told to “Follow *your* passion, chart *your own* course, march to the beat of *your own* drummer, follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*. This,” he says, “is the litany of expansive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture.” This is the serpent dressed up in an academic robe and mortar board, come to accept an honorary degree, come to talk about himself, to peddle her sage advice, to tempt the next generation with the notion that they shall not die like the last generation, but will become wise like God if they go for it: go for the life that is to be desired to make one wise or rich or famous; go for the life that is all about them.

As a member of the generation that bought this advice and lived it out on Wall Street and K Street and Bank Street until presently, on the streets where “For Sale” signs

barely begin to tell of the lives foreclosed, the dreams deferred, the hopes dashed, I wonder if my fellow alumni, who are, even now, attending our 40th reunion following commencement, I wonder if any have noticed that the fig leaf covering our private lives is not big enough to cover the sins of a greedy, self-serving generation. So righteous about race and peace we were, once upon a time, until we saw what was a delight to the eye and went for it; until we pursued what was to be desired with little regard for anyone other than ourselves and hoarded it.

I think it no coincidence that many in my generation also quit the community of faith and the disciplined listening for God's address week in and week out, in favor of a well-deserved rest that only a Sunday could offer them in their busy and important lives; quit organized religion in favor of a self-styled faith in the things that could be grasped—grasped literally and also grasped by minds too sophisticated to fall for the claim that God was in Christ and too confident to live in response to a word not their own. If at all religious, the baby-boomers preferred a god who was made in the image of the autonomous self, a god who, at most, set up the whole theatre of creation and then said, "Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be"; a god who whispered words of wisdom, perhaps, but made no demands.

Imagine, then, on the fifth of June and in light of the eighth of Mark, another commencement speaker come to announce to an expectant crowd the possibility of a whole new life. The scene is neither a garden nor a college campus. It is a village in the Caesarea Philippi district of Palestine. The commencement speaker is a teacher, and for many, even some who are here in these pews today, that is enough to say about him; for others, especially those who had been following him for three years, this would be the day when they had to say more, when they had to confess that in him, God had come to them. "You are the Messiah," says Peter, the Christ, the One who will save your people from a life of oppression and poverty and death; the One who will inaugurate a whole new life, filled with endless possibilities, material abundance, freedom from fear and want.

But this commencement speaker, this bringer of new life, instead speaks to his disciples of the great suffering and rejection and death that await him and, by implication, await any who would follow him. Immediately Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to give him a piece of his mind because Peter is of a mind that he understands God's will better than God does. In the best light, Peter's rebuke could have been born of his love of the teacher whom he would not allow to be hurt for anything in the world. In an honest light, Peter had left everything he had ever worked for behind, left wife and house and livelihood, for what ought to be a better life, a happier life, the life Peter had in mind.

Yet having just come from the garden in the third of Genesis, I cannot help but wonder whether this teacher, who was human and tempted in every way as we are, found Peter's rebuke persuasive for just a moment. I wonder this because, in his next breath, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying "Get thee behind me Satan!" In other words, Peter's words to Jesus were the words of the serpent, the same tempter we met in Genesis, who has proffered the autonomous life to vulnerable human beings since the beginning of time. Could it be, as Nikos Kazantzakis imagined in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, that at this critical turn in the road even Jesus was tempted to follow his bliss rather than the self-emptying, self-giving love that would lead us to follow him to his death and so to our life? Jesus rebukes Peter for setting his mind on human things, says Mark, rather than on God.

Then Jesus calls to the crowd and, in the presence of the disciples, presents the life we are given to lead in him as a free choice. We are again in the garden! If you want to follow me, he says, if it is the life given you by God to lead that you would dare, then it will be a life clean contrary to all the things and the pursuits you think you now desire. Jesus speaks of denying self, bearing a cross, losing life, gaining nothing, following him where love leads.

Says David Brooks of such a life, we find ourselves not as we look inside and then plan a life, but rather as we look outside and are found by some challenge that claims us, some difficulty that that summons us, some calling clear contrary to our desire that is worth our life. As the now hackneyed but true words of Frederick Buechner put the matter of vocation, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” As the less known words of T.S. Eliot put it in *The Cocktail Party*, the choice “requires faith—/The kind of faith that issues from despair. /The destination cannot be described;/You will know very little until you get there/You will journey blind. But the way leads towards the possession/Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.”

This is why, as Brooks goes on to say, “When you read a biography of someone you admire, it’s rarely the things that made them happy that compel your admiration. It’s the things they did to court unhappiness—the things they did that were arduous and miserable, which sometimes cost them friends and aroused hatred. It’s excellence, not happiness, that we admire most.”

I think of Elizabeth L. Sturz, whose obituary I have been saving for such a Sunday as this. “Mrs. Sturz had lived a full life before she plunged into the urban wasteland of the South Bronx in 1968,” the obituary begins. “She had been a poet, circus acrobat, novelist, soap opera writer, ghostwriter for Madam Chiang Kai-shek and wife of Alan Lomax, the famous folklorist.” They divorced in 1950 and, three years later in Positano, Italy, she met Herbert Jay Sturz in a bar, saw him a few nights later at a chamber music concert and married him in 1958, the same year they jointly published a novel about Spain. I love this woman!

“But,” the obituary continues, “it was through her work with the severely distressed that she made her greatest mark. The mission began in the Bronx’s Melrose neighborhood with an educational program for youths considered unteachable and incorrigible. By demanding rigorous instruction and requiring manual labor but still offering affection, her Argus Learning Center achieved a 70 percent success rate. [Soon] Argus expanded to...address issues including teenage pregnancy, prisoner re-entry and AIDS. In 1989, [Argus] began Harbor House, a program to address homeless individuals suffering from both mental illness and drug addiction.” Sturz taught them horticulture and turned the rubble of abandoned lots into gardens growing “tomatoes and green peppers, pansies and petunias.”

Elizabeth Sturz, who died at the ripe old age of 93, said that she “wanted to be of use.” In her book about Argus, she said she started her work in the Bronx for the simplest of reasons: “I wanted to leave a footprint somewhere, perhaps even a wing beat.” Though here is the thing, lest you think such a life eschews beauty in favor of goodness, delight in favor of dreary duty: this poet and novelist and circus acrobat and soap opera writer “chose the name [of her community] from the Greek myth of Argus, the giant of many eyes. After his death, a compassionate goddess, not wanting this wonder to pass from the world, gathered up the giant’s eyes and placed them in

the tail of the peacock, a bird of transcendent beauty.” The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

Therefore Jesus says to those embarking upon their life’s adventure, in the imagination of Martin Luther, “Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire—that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple.” On the fifth of June, dear graduates of the class of ’45 or ’58 or ’66 or ’71 or ’82 or ’97 and now the class of ’2011, know that the life you have been given by God to lead is not about you. It is about the God whom you were made to glorify and enjoy forever. Thanks be to God!