***Jesus Did Not Consider Himself A Victim***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 28, 2024*

*based on John 10:11-18*

Just about every family in the world has a core story. My family is no different. A hundred and fifty years ago a great-great aunt of mine was visiting a cousin of hers, my great-great grandfather. He was a pioneer of California and had come west on a wagon train. He owned 400 acres on the Cosumnes River near Sacramento.

The first night she was there she had a nightmare: her youngest girl was swimming in the river and drowned. Frightened by this, and given to premonitions, she gathered up her little girl, said her goodbyes, and grabbed a stage back to Red Bluff where she lived. Just a few weeks later the little girl was playing on the roof, slid off it into a brimming rain barrel, upside-down and died.

This kind of story can instill in a family a mighty sense of fate. I saw this in my father, growing up. I’ve come to resist it, myself. One reason may have to do with what I’ve learned in my profession. I think of a man who once, long ago, came into my office. He was nervous. He said he had to talk to someone. He told me something he’d done, and followed it up with words like –

"There was just nothing else I could do, I had no other choice." Well, there is nothing unusual about this. This is often the way we are tempted to describe our lives, right? “I had no choice. No other way out. There was nothing else to be done.”

We are caught. Our lives are constricted and constrained by webs of necessity. Isn't this what studies in psychology have taught us all our lives?

We are not really living our own lives, determining the course of our destiny. Rather, we are caught in a web of psychological determination. “Our parents did it to us,” we say. “Our mothers are to blame.” Our genes made us do [whatever it is].

In 1943, the French Philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, wrote *Being and Nothingness*. In that book, Sartre asserted that the thing that makes us human, that which separates us from the animals, is our ability to choose. In every circumstance in life, we have the freedom to choose. Even when we don't realize we are choosing, we are choosing.

All circumstances in life, even those that appear to be completely constricted, offer us room for choice. For Sartre, our lives are not a given; rather, our lives are created. We exist in a physical sense, that is a given. But we don't really exist as human beings until we embrace the freedom of our choices.

At one point in *Being and* *Nothingness,* Sartre describes having a conversation with a friend in a French café. They sit and watch a very officious waiter bustling about from table to table.

The waiter is a stereotypical French waiter: pompous, proud; a bit contemptuous of the customers.

Sartre says to his companion, that man has turned himself into a waiter.

Each little movement of his eyes, each movement of his hands, the way he walks, the way he holds himself, his professional way of smiling, all of this represents choice.

This man, who could possibly be any number of human beings, is turning himself into a waiter. He is choosing one form of human existence and not another.

Of course, very little of this is in the consciousness of the waiter. He doesn't know that he is busy deciding. But that is not really the point. The point is that he *is* deciding; he is moving his life in one direction and not another.

Across the café sits a couple, talking about this and that, drinking cups of coffee. They are obviously just getting to know one another. The young man casually reaches across the table and puts his hand upon the hand of the girl.

She does not pull her hand away. She glances briefly at his hand, touching hers, and she continues to talk.

Sartre says she has also chosen; she has made a decision. She did not think about it very much, did not agonize over it, but she is entering a relationship with this man, through her action, or lack of action. Even not to choose is therefore to choose. Through our choices we become particular sorts of people. We are shutting some doors and opening others.

A Nazi SS officer, when asked why he participated in the killing of a town full of Jews in World War II, explains, "I was an officer. I was conscripted by the Hitler Youth, which I had to go into. I had to obey my parents, and then I had to obey the orders of my higher-ups. There was no other way."

Sartre disagrees. There is *always* another way. To walk down one particular road is to choose not to walk down other roads. But much of our lives, says Sartre, is an attempt to evade responsibility for our lives.

Here is a true first-person story told by a man named Max.

*Twelve years ago, while enrolled in a graduate writing program, I met two significant people in my life: the woman who would become my wife, and Barb, a dear friend and the best critic of my writing I ever had.*

*It made no sense for Barb and me to become friends. We were opposites in every way. She dabbled in drugs, and slept with men of questionable character. But I always knew I could count on Barb to tell me the hard truth about my fiction, about my life, about my relationships.*

*Shortly after I began dating my future wife, Barb warned me that if I stayed with this woman, everything I wanted would slip through my fingers. She felt as if she were watching me die, she said.*

*“Pick me as your friend, or her as your lover,” Barb told me, “because I won’t stay around to watch you wither away.”*

*Two years later I was engaged and living far from the town where I’d attended that writing program. An old acquaintance called with the news that Barb had died ... She had told almost no one she was sick, keeping up appearances, even as she prepared to die. Though we had our falling out, I was disappointed that she hadn’t called me.*

*When people asked why I didn’t go to Barb’s funeral, I told them my fiancée wouldn’t let me.*

*When several weeks after Barb’s death, I gave up serious writing, I blamed the sound of Barb’s angry criticisms in my head. When I abandoned serious university teaching, which was the one remaining facet of my literary life I’d always wanted, I told myself it was to focus on my duties as a husband and father.*

*As my marriage unraveled a few years later, I claimed that leaving the university hadn’t been my decision at all, that I had been bullied into taking that path. None of it, I said, not a single bad decision in the preceding eight years, had been my fault.*

*A year ago I resumed writing after a ten-year hiatus. I’m taking responsibility for how my life has turned out now, and am peeling back layers of excuses that have prevented me from living. I’d forgotten how hard confronting life without excuses could be.*

*Recently I stumbled upon one of Barb’s notes on a story of mine. “People are guided by will and emotion,” she wrote. Though we might blame others for the things we do, she said, our own minds and hearts govern our actions. If Barb were here, I’d tell her that she was right.*

You know, when the Hebrews finally came to the brink of the promised land, to this great gift God was about to give them, Joshua told the people to stop; to not enter the land casually. Then he stood before them and said, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

He saw their entrance into the promised land, not simply as a gift of God, but also an intentional choice to be made.

Would they serve the God that (according to tradition) had given them this land, or would they be influenced by the false gods who they would be tempted to worship in this new world? Choice. It’s crucial.

One of the most read books of the 20th century was Victor Frankl's, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Some of you were assigned to read it once-upon-a-time.

Victor Frankl was a distinguished psychotherapist who as a young man was uprooted and put in a Nazi concentration camp with his family. He was separated from his wife and other loved ones. Many of his fellow prisoners fell into complete despair. They had lost everything including their dignity. Little wonder then that some prisoners sat down and died.

Frankl noted the deaths of a number of prisoners who were not particularly ill, or who hadn't been ill-treated. They just simply gave up. They simply laid down and died.

He spoke about their resignation to their "fate." They saw no other way-out. The allies were not coming for them. There was little hope of escape from the prison, and so they died rather than put in the effort to try and survive.

Frankl chose another way. Each day, walking out to the work site, he thought of the book that he had been writing before coming into the camp. He composed the book in his mind, chapter by chapter.

He thought of his wife. He pictured their good times in the past, he fanaticized about the future they would have together. His body was stuck behind barbed wire but his spirit roamed free.

And he survived. His survival was not only a matter of good fortune, but also due to his own conscious efforts.

The ability to choose, is one of God's greatest gifts to us.

To embrace our choices is also, in a sense, a gift we give our creator. Think of it this way -- creation is not finished. The story of our creation in *Genesi*s says that God has made us co-creators.

And we become co-creators with God through our choices. We can say yes, and we can say no.

We can take one road and not another. In that sense, we don't exist until we choose. To evade choosing, to let our lives just drift along, is to be unfaithful to the gift of life that God has given us.

I have seen this ability to choose, to shape and create life, even among people lying on beds of pain, immobilized, unable to walk. What more striking picture could there be, of helplessness in the face of fate than that? This person can’t even sit up in bed. Is it silly to speak of a freedom to choose in this situation?

Sometimes, yes – depending, of course, upon what they are up against. But sometimes no.

Back in my college days I heard a lecturer speaking on the subject of Existentialism. He said he could summarize much of the philosophy of Existentialism in the phrase, "No excuses."

I also remember verbatim a sign on the wall of my Junior High locker-room:

“People who are good at making excuses are seldom good at anything else.”

I believe this to be one of the prime functions of church. We come here each week, I hope, in order to engage in fruitful reflection upon our lives. Our worship experiences are designed then to be vehicles that enable us to step back from our lives for a moment.

I offer stories, possible scenarios where we can see the direction our lives might be moving. Is this a fruitful direction, or not? Are we choosing life or are we choosing something else?

Have we pictured ourselves as mere victims of fate, buffeted about by the decisions of others? Or have we taken responsibility for ourselves?

Here we find, hopefully the wisdom to see more clearly the choices that lie before us, but also the courage to make those choices, and then live them.

As I said, we all need clarity, but we also need courage. We talk about drawing our model of love from Jesus, but we can also draw courage from him --

I say this because it is at the heart of today’s scripture. Jesus is remembered to have said,

“No one takes my life from me. I give it up of my own accord.”

Now, of all the people who have lived on the earth, he could easily have said, “It wasn’t MY fault. I was betrayed by my closest friends and put on a cross by a mob at the directed of an empire, to the nodding ascent of the leaders of my own religion.”

But he didn’t say that at all. He said, “No one takes my life from me. I give it up of my own accord.”

That is courage with a capital C.

Ironically, he is just so different from the candidate for president who often compares himself favorably to Jesus.

Last weekend before his current criminal trial began he was at a rally in Pennsylvania where, as he often does, he cast himself as a victim of persecution.

You know, Jesus never did that. From all we know about him, Jesus, who was crucified, never even *thought* to do that. Victimhood was as far from his essence as oil is from water, which is what makes him who he was.

Inspired by Jesus’s example of courage, the apostle Paul said the following -

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; “ ------- and then he says, “for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for God’s good purposes.”

We make our choices, and then God works with those choices to make our lives what they should be. But first we have to embrace the freedom to choose.

It’s been said, “No one can steer a ship that isn’t moving. Not even God.”

A lot of people just get stuck in life. They don’t give life or God a chance. They make excuses. They opt out. They give up. They write the word “Victim” on their forehead and wear that for the rest of their days.

To embrace being who you really are, a child of God, means you don’t need to do that. Ever.

Amen.