

## RSVP

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society  
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Rev. Craig M. Nowak

Jesus, a Congregational minister and a fruit vendor walk into a Unitarian Universalist minister's sermon. Days later I still don't have a good punchline, but what I hope I have is a message worthy in some way of your presence here this morning.

To begin, and for the benefit of anyone who missed last Sunday's sermon, I spoke last week to the idea that our life chooses us. And that the life that has chosen us may be different from the life we've chosen for ourselves and are currently living. Further, we explored the ways we're called to the life that has chosen us.

And so we pick up this week with this idea that we're all called to a life that has chosen us. We've heard the call, felt the inner stirrings, noticed the nudges toward or away from people, places, and so forth. In short we've received the invitation. The next move is ours...

Répondez s'il vous plait.

Respond, if you please.

Life, our life, awaits our RSVP.

Do we accept or send our regrets? It can be an agonizing decision. In part because we want assurances. I mean the life we're presently living may not exactly be the life that's chosen us, but at least its reasonably predictable. I remember while discerning my call to ministry I told my spiritual director, I'm willing to go through the expense and put in the time to follow this call to ministry as long as I know it will work out. He laughed at me in his gentle, wise way and quoted the Danish author Isak Dinesen, "God made the world round so we would never be able to see too far down the road."

And so in the absence of assurances, how do we move forward? How do we accept the invitation to the life that has chosen us?

One way is by seeking stories. In the absence of certainty about how our decision to choose the life that has chosen us might play out, we turn to stories about other people who have gone before us.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert, our second reading this morning, is one such story. And one need not be a Christian or even knowledgeable of Christian doctrine concerning Jesus to appreciate its power. The story as presented in the text has the devil taunting Jesus by questioning his identity and worth and then tempting him show off...to surrender himself to worldly measures of power, status and worthiness.

For Jesus, to give into these temptations would be to reject the life that has chosen him, a life defined by transcending and redefining social and religious conventions in a time when a moralizing, politically powerful strong man was the dominant image of a leader. The story thus serves to inform us that we who say yes to the life that has chosen us, should expect obstacles, personified in the Biblical story as the devil, that will tempt and pressure us with expectations and enticements that do not align with what life is asking from us.

I can't say for sure, but I suspect the Rev. David Good, being a Congregational minister, knew the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert well and that it resonated deeply with him. David, as you heard in Yann's introduction to our offertory today, founded the Tree of Life Educational Fund, which SUUS is supporting through our share the plate initiative.

David and I were supposed to co-lead a service in this very pulpit about a year ago today. The illness from which he died in April of 2024, prevented him from making it here last September, but after some necessary adjustments, the service we planned went on. And the sermon David and I ultimately co-wrote, was filled with stories, stories of people doing their best to live the life that chose them. A life defined in part, by peacemaking...peacemaking in the midst of constant temptation to violence and vengeance.

Their stories, like the story of Tree of Life's founding as recounted in David's obituary, serves as another story we might turn to in contemplating a yes to our life's invitation.

It reads, "One of David's greatest contributions....emerged in the days and months following the 9/11 attacks. Almost immediately, he (David) reached out to the Muslim community and the Jewish Federation of Southeastern Connecticut, doing whatever he could to counter the fear and paranoia generated by that event, while also helping everyone within his orbit to both appreciate and celebrate the vast wisdom of the three Abrahamic faith traditions. An interfaith journey to the Holy Land with Christian, Muslim and Jewish participants soon followed. That first trip led to the formation of the Tree of Life ministry, dedicated to the pursuit of human rights in Palestine and in Israel."

I imagine David's response to the 9/11 attacks was not without controversy, even among some of his colleagues and congregants at the time. David's response and the founding of Tree of Life reminds us that choosing the life that chooses us does not guarantee us a smooth or predictable path. Indeed it may place us at odds with our neighbors, family, and friends, especially in the wake of unforeseen events. Events that may well provide an opening to abandon the life that has chosen us or to live it more fully.

Now, for most of us here today, the life that chooses us, may not feel as dramatic or consequential as the life that chose Jesus, or David Good, or people living in Palestine and Israel. We may not feel it matters all that much whether or when we reply with an acceptance or send our regrets.

But I'm willing to bet the fruit vendor from our Time for All Ages would beg to differ.

In the story, as you may recall, the vendor, seeking to attract new customers puts up a board promoting his fresh fruits. One by one, the story tells us, people come up to the vendor criticize the message on his board and tell him how to change it. In the process the original message of the sign is slowly removed until it disappears altogether. In the end the vendor is ridiculed for displaying an empty board and asked why he isn't using it.

Rather than giving us a heads up about what to expect when we accept our invitation to the life that has chosen us, this story offers a warning about turning it down. It warns when we turn it down, we become something other than ourselves. And eventually we disappear. Taken together or on their own the stories of Jesus' temptation, David Good's founding of Tree of Life Educational Fund, of the fruit vendor offer some insight into what awaits us when we accept or turn down the life that has chosen us. Still, one of the pitfalls of looking to the stories of others is a tendency to read the action around the insights as instructions.

For example, in the story of Jesus' temptation, the text tells us he appealed to scripture to counter the devil.

Likewise, in David Good's story, he goes against the grain in his ministry.

Then there's the fruit vendor who can't seem to refuse anyone but himself.

So does accepting the life that has chosen us, knowing that we'll face obstacles, an unpredictable path, and a world constantly trying to make us anything but who

we are also mean we also have to become scripture quoting contrarians who only listen to ourselves?

Of course not. But try telling that to someone who is fond of quoting chapter and verse in response to how...well, usually others....are living the life that has chosen them.

Aware of our human tendency to fix our attention on the wrong thing in looking to the stories of others, the Sufi poet Rumi wrote the following to gently shift our gaze,

*Who gets up early  
to discover the moment light begins?  
Who finds us here circling, bewildered, like atoms?  
Who comes to a spring thirsty  
and sees the moon reflected in it?  
Who, like Jacob blind with grief and age,  
smells the shirt of his lost son  
and can see again?  
Who lets a bucket down and brings up  
a flowing prophet?  
Or like Moses goes for fire  
and finds what burns inside the sunrise?  
Jesus slips into a house to escape enemies,  
and opens a door to the other world.  
Soloman cuts open a fish, and there's a gold ring.  
Omar storms in to kill the prophet  
and leaves with blessings.  
Chase a deer and end up everywhere!  
An oyster opens his mouth to swallow on drop.  
Now there's a pearl.  
A vagrant wanders empty ruins.  
Suddenly he's wealthy.  
But don't be satisfied with stories, how things  
have gone with others. Unfold  
your own myth, without complicated explanation,  
so everyone will understand the passage,  
We have opened you.  
Start walking toward Shams. Your legs will get heavy  
and tired. Then comes a moment  
of feeling the wings you've grown,  
lifting.*

With imagery both eloquent and esoteric, Rumi points us toward a single thread running through each of our three stories today. A thread to follow as we contemplate accepting and living the life that has chosen us, “But don’t be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.”

Rumi, a master of story telling, reminds us stories are great. They’re entertaining and the best certainly offer us wisdom, but ultimately we must live our own story. A story that isn’t going to be exactly like anyone else’s, past, present, or future.

Indeed Rumi reminds us, although they may offer many insights into what the journey is like, Jesus, David Good, and the fruit vendor’s stories, offer us but one truly universal instruction: To live the life that has chosen you, accept the invitation with faith in your own myth. Unfold it without complicated explanation, moment by moment, in this great round world.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be