

Sermon: Existentialism, January 30th 2022
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The obvious message of the Sisyphus myth is that it is a dreadful punishment to perform a task that is not only hard work, but predetermined to fail, to be futile.

And, For Camus and the existentialists- that task is,...
that task is....

...Well, before I directly answer the question you probably know the answer too...

I think it is helpful to get in the frame of mind, the petri dish of truth and experience that grows an existentialist

I want you to imagine, yourself in the predicament Sandra Bullock the protagonist of the movie Gravity finds herself in. I just watched it on the plane for the 4th time.

By the way is to me an amazing film, that I don't advise you watch on a plane if you are already afraid of flying.

This might be best if you close your eyes.

Ready, ok, now I want you to imagine your head and body poured into a big clumsy space-suit, head and face bound by a mask.

Your sorta used to it now, with our frustrating masks.

As we pick up Sandra's situation she has been in space for about a week and is tired. The mission is almost over.

Except in an instant you find yourself separated from the safety of the space station by a tether cut by space debris, and weightlessly hurtling in endless somersaults, head over heels, head over heels, 150 miles above the profile of the earth

You are not falling as much as hurtling and getting dizzy with no gravity to stop you, from falling. Sadly for Sandra Bullock this is no dream. It is however, dark and dead silent, silent except for the panicked beat of your heart pounding hard and filling your mask with mist.

It is right about then, when you realize that you realize you are short on oxygen and the terror of the fate that you have been trying to reason your way around, fails to work, that you realize you are in a place that is wholly indifferent to you.

That is the moment of truth, of awareness, of what an existentialist might even argue is a disturbing version of enlightenment.

It is at the point of awareness ,

Accepting the true revelation of our fate that existentialists begin their philosophy.

You can open your eyes

Existentialists start with the truth that to be human means that you are a creature in over our head, on a mission that has no net, ..on a mission no one can save you from.

That feeling, that we are in a predicament, that we can't wake up from, but should wake up too, is a good emotional place to start talking about existentialism.

I know I am being redundant, but making that point is more helpful than quoting Kirkegaard. Because, to the existentialists it only takes a bit of honesty, to see that what it is to be alive is to live life without a net.

Really, without a hope,

Space suit or safely on earth we have no place to turn.

Got it.

For Camus the word that best describes that place is Absurd.

For Sartre, another existentialist, and his French contemporary our predicament is even better described by the word meaningless.

Having fun?

Glad you came to church.

Religions, of course get this truth.

Religions are to existentialists the effort to confront this.

You get this too,

Consciously or not, you are likely in church as a means of confronting this.

I think that is probably a good decision.

Some existentialists get that too.

Existentialists know religions are playing with the same ultimate concerns, but answer it an entirely different way.

Existentialists, are a movement we can think of as starting about the same time we became really modern humans, and about the same time we in larger and larger numbers began to think our way away from our traditional faith.

Existentialists are the whisper in your ear (say if whispering) “You know, you don’t really believe those traditional stories anymore, and you are, if you are really going to be human, going to have to do something about that. (end of whisper)

I think is the core thing that from Sartre to Heidegger, from Kirkegaard and Camus existentialists agrees on, is that there is no avoiding our state of affairs here as humans,

There is no denying our predicament

There is no thinking your way around it.

And with that truth in mind, of course I am summarizing here, there are two fundamental responses that existentialists adopt in light of life’s great absurd challenge that you can’t reason your way into not caring about.

...The first, and truly only real response to some existentialists worth taking, as Kirkegaard does, is to take a leap of faith ...to, well, faith in God. That might sound traditional, except that for Kirkegaard, he is perfectly un-retreating that there really is no good reason to take this leap.

It is important to remember here that the existentialists don’t try to talk themselves into the idea that this act is well reasoned, he and they just gets that such a leap, is just that. a blind leap with no other options.

And the other, existential option is to liberate yourself from all the philosophical baggage our religious and cultural heritages have handed to us. And to live as free and authentically as one can.

For the existentialists all the historic religious practices, all philosophical and cultural efforts constructed to support us in life, don't work ...are no match for what we face. They would say, there is nothing left to say (I take my minister's robe off and throw it on the ground with disdain), shed it all!

In fact, to the existentialists most of our religious pasts are more likely to aid us in avoiding life's great challenges

Camus and Sartre together roughly say we should spread your wings and go be you, dive into a self-construction the one great project of your uniqueness.

In a world devoid of meaning, we have got to build our own.

And by that, they mean you, not we, got to build your own, yah you!

Existentialists like Camus, tell us that we have to face that there is a security and order, and really a justice that we want, almost expect the universe to provide for us. But sadly that is not what we find

In a crass nutshell, "were screwed.. but being such we are free, and well acceptance of that is the price of freedom.

And given that we are in such an absurd state, a state not much different than Sisyphus or Sandra Bullock, although probably much more comfortable we, at least from Camus moral perspective should begin by asking ourselves a question, really the first question.

"Should I kill myself."

And once you have answered that, and hopefully you are still here, you can pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and see that you are free, and see that although your life is unavoidably not much different from pushing a rock up a hill, or floating helpless in space, you can do that in whatever way you see fit.

More or less, we are asked to do something just as futile as Sisyphus's task.

But we are free to do it anyway we like. Even do it joyfully.

See, Sisyphus to Camus is an absurd hero.

Sisyphus scorn of the gods, his passion for life, the world, and his hatred of death, are for Camus, the most appropriate way to life your life.

See for existentialists, there can be a bit of a revelation here, for like us, once we are struck by a moment of consciousness that he will never escape this situation we are in, the torment can be over.

For Camus, once we boldly stop resisting our fate and embrace it. As absurd as it is for Camus, We can push our stone and live our life, our fate with dignity.

For Sartre, the dignity comes from building your own meaning, and finding, well, essentially creating your own unique self. Essentially rather than working yourself into the role of a helpful humble servant, the new moral choice is to become your own creative project.

For existentialists, because there are no given absolutes, we must choose life-goals that are limited and relative,

Without deceiving ourselves that our values are ultimate and absolute.

For Camus life stands over and against death in a way that is unrelenting,

And in general what comes out of that freedom and really their new challenge is a morality that demands not loyalty and faithful humility, but qualities like Authenticity, creativity, uniqueness, and courage.

(Pause, and a change of tone)

Sometimes providing more details, who exactly says what, and believes what more can be distracting to a message than helpful, and I will avoid laying out the distinctions between Sartre and Camus, between Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, and there are some.

I will avoid making this sermon a lecture because to me images here today are more important.

The goal/reward is that when we give up on the old myths, we can move on to our own unique projects and what we choose to be as our self-chosen ultimate purpose. Then our everyday activities can be organized toward the fulfillment of whatever we choose as our ultimate purposes in life.

Ironically, contrastingly to faith, it is death that cleans up our need to get on it.

The existentialists speak about some of the clarity that cancer can bring.

Now I am no strict existentialist. I hold out more hope than they do that we humans are part of a creation headed by a God. That is a possibility, and beyond that I think it is fair to say that I think that the world has more inherent magic in it, but let's not retreat from today's lesson.

I would like to invite you today to work with their scary perspective as Truth, and to use their poignant truth as a prompt to form something of a covenant with yourself.

I would like to invite yourself to give yourself permission to love yourself for the imperfect being that you are, as long as you continually strive to be the authentic person that you are.

I invite you to begin to think of the courage it takes to do the only job you can, and that is to express and deliver to the world your own uniqueness, as if it were invited by your own unique acceptance of your own finite brokenness.

The gift of your life was given freely, a result of life's longing for itself, from an alive universe we can I think best describe as indifferent and magical at the exact same time.

And having been given this gift, we the Existentialists would say, that we are asked to use our lives, to do something lovely and generous and wonderful with them that we might be a blessing.
Amen.