

TEXT, FOR THE RECORD

*Gerhard O. Forde (1927–2005) retired from Luther Seminary in 1998.
Here is his final chapel homily, used with permission from Timothy Gerhard Forde
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Chapel, May 12, '98. You Will Not Die. Genesis 3:1–5; Col. 3:3
“You will not die, you will be like God, knowing good from evil.”

The serpent knows how to preach. He doesn't mess around with things irrelevant. He has no cute stories to tell. He might have begun, you know, by going on and on about his experiences, about the injustices of being made to crawl in the dust and the dirt, the dregs of creation. “You know,” we can imagine him saying, “the other day as I was slipping through the slime, I got to thinking that . . .” et cetera et cetera. He might have spoken of the obligatory “we” or “us.” He might have suggested “You know, this creation that God has saddled us with may not be the best he could do for us. We should probably take what God says with a grain of salt.” But no, he doesn't bother with any of that. He knows how to preach. So, he goes straight for the jugular. He doesn't talk about us, he speaks directly “to you.” He doesn't mess around with preliminaries and trivialities. He has more important business at hand. He knows that death is the problem. And he speaks a wild, exciting, hopeful promise. “You will not die.”

Think what a promise that is! “You will not die, you will be like God, knowing good from evil.” Have you ever heard anything like it? Who would dare speak such words? Does it not penetrate to the very root and core of your being? You shall not die! Furthermore, is it not the heart and soul of human religion? It's a sermon whose power only increases with age; it is never outmoded, never irrelevant. Do we not live, as Ernest Becker taught us, from the denial of death, on borrowed time, so to speak—are we not of necessity driven to do so? It is no wonder, I think, that Karl Barth once called the serpent's words the “archetype of all sermons.” (*Romans*, 247.) The serpent, he

trenchantly observes, is “the first shepherd of [our] souls,” the first to offer advice concerning the commandments of God.

The archetype of all sermons! Think on it! That may well, of course, be something of an exaggeration. But in any case, I think we can say it is the most successful sermon by far. I think I have heard that sermon all too often, and to be honest, not a few times right here in this hallowed place! (Being honest is one of the prerogatives of one who is about to retire, you know. It’s too late to fire me now!) But what is the secret of the serpent’s success? Not merely his brevity, though he certainly was remarkable on that score. He would never have run overtime! No, the secret is in the power and subtlety of his word.

As Barth put it, he is the first to offer us advice on the commandments of God. The first to seduce us with the only weapon we have access to, to posit that knowledge of good and evil is our ticket to eternity, the escape-hatch from death. No doubt he knows that once we have the knowledge of good and evil we will easily fall for the temptation to make our own use of it. But of course, he doesn’t go into that aspect of the problem. His reputation for subtlety is well-earned. For the serpent knows that if we take his advice, he will have us. The relationship with God will be broken. It makes no difference whether we do evil or good, he has us all the same. For we shall be preoccupied with ourselves. And another word, fearsome and awesome, begins to resound: You shall surely die.

What then is the escape from this archetype of all sermons? The fact is, I expect, that there isn’t any. We need another more powerful sermon. And that means the only “cure” now is a radical one: that death itself that we so desperately fear. There was one who took upon himself those words, “You shall surely die.” And now there is another word, another sermon, not masked in subtleties, but straight-forward and strong, a wondrously short declaration springing forth from the empty tomb. Listen to it and don’t forget it—ever: “You have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” And that’s all that needs to be said. A word shall overthrow the serpent! Amen.

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