

This past week my family found ourselves at a second hospital trying to figure out what was going on with my father-in-law, who has since been released and is now home. We found ourselves at INOVA Fairfax frustrated that doctors had not been able to determine the cause of my father-in-law’s multiple strokes. As my husband, Nelson, was walking in the hospital one evening he saw someone that was familiar to him. My cousin Dennis was walking in. They greeted each other and Dennis reminded Nelson that INOVA was the hospital where my cousin’s son had been staying for the past five months after he had been born prematurely.

The very next day when I went to visit my father-in-law, I also got to meet my second cousin, sweet Chesney James, a beautiful, albeit small, 5-month-old. It was the day of his release. Had we had been there any other day I would not have gotten to see him since his parents normally were not there during the day. I felt this was a divine encounter and I found myself thinking: “Everything happens for a reason.”

This is a phrase we say to make the best of a difficult situation. We use it to bring others hope when we cannot understand why a particular thing would happen, but sometimes this phrase does not bring hope or encouragement, but more confusion and questions.

Today is the sixth and final week of “The Sticks and Stones: The Things We Say” Sermon Series. We have already tackled 1) Love the Sinner Hate the Sin 2) You’ll Be in My Thoughts and Prayers 3) God Helps Those Who Help Themselves 4) The prosperity gospel, and 5) God won’t give you more than you can handle.

It has been very interesting as we have been studying the origin of all these phrases and found that they do not in fact come from the Bible, but from our cultural understanding and experience of humanity.

The origin of today’s phrase is unknown, but like our other phrases it has been loosely linked to the bible. Another way to say this phrase is to respond to something that has happened by saying, “This was God’s will.”

There is no way that we can know for sure which things that happen are the will of God and which things happen that are caused by the effects of free will and the forces of sin and wickedness in the world. I think it is safe to say that the things that happen in this life that are life giving usually stem from the will of God, and things that bring death and destruction are rooted in sin.

We cannot discount free will. God is still sovereign over the world today, but God in God’s mercy gave us free will and it is the way we choose to use this free will that can cause things to happen that are outside the purview of God’s will. Also, the effects of sin in the world can cause things to happen outside of our own free will.

If you study this topic pertaining to God theologically, you will find it under the term “theodicy” which is defined by *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as “the defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.”<sup>i</sup>

So often as a pastor, people ask me why would God allow for difficult things to happen to them? To these questions I usually respond: “I don’t know, but I do know that God is with you in the midst of your suffering.”

I have experienced things in this life that I cannot explain both tragic and beautiful. I want to believe that everything happens for a reason, because I want my life and the lives of others to have meaning, but I have to acknowledge that most of the time, our suffering is the result of sin in the world and not our own individual sin; this is why it is so hard for us to understand why we have to bear so much pain.

The person who understands evil at work in the world more than any other person in the Bible is Job. Job was blameless in the sight of the Lord, and yet he ended up losing his material possessions, his family, and his health all while the Devil took hold of him to test his faith.

Yet, even in the midst of all his struggles he shared these words from Job 19:25-27: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”

Job like many of the psalmist teaches us a powerful lesson, that even in the midst of unexplained or undeserved suffering, we are called to recognize that God is still good.

At the end of her book “Everything Happens for a Reason,” Kate Bowler says, “I will die yes, but not today.”<sup>ii</sup> In this her memoir about her battle with cancer and her honest questioning of God’s will during her extreme physical suffering, her book ends trusting in God while holding unto hope.

This is who we are as the people of God. We are people of hope even during despair and division.

In our lectionary text today from the gospel of Luke, we hear that Jesus promises us that through our faith in Him, we will experience division. Jesus says, “...they will be divided: father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Luke 12:53).

Now this is not the good news we long to hear from Jesus Christ. We would rather hear Jesus Christ preach about peace and reconciliation, not division, and yet Jesus is honest with us about the life of discipleship.

Before Jesus’ ministry began, his cousin John the Baptist, prepared people to receive him. To differentiate himself between Jesus and himself in Luke 3:16 John said: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John’s pronouncement was right. Jesus not only baptizes people with water, but through the power of the Holy Spirit. We continue this baptism of Jesus Christ today. Every time someone is baptized in The United Methodist Church we say: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and then pray “the Holy Spirit work within you through water and the Spirit you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus’ refining fire is still at work in the world today through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy of the baptismal covenant, we too recognize the challenges of discipleship. This is why we ask the questions:

“Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin...Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”<sup>iv</sup>

Within our baptismal liturgy we recognize that due to the fall, sin is still at work in the world today, and yet, through our faith in Jesus Christ, we are called to combat this sin through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and we do not do this alone. We do this in community.

**The good news for our lives today is even in the midst of division, pain, and an inability to understand why bad things happen to good people, Jesus Christ calls us to rejoice in the present moment and be thankful.**

Yes, Jesus does warn us that the kingdom of God is near and that we are called to repentance, and Jesus also tells us don’t miss it. God is at work in the world today and we are called to be part of this redemptive work.

Commentary puts it this way: “Jesus has come to bring God’s peace, but the work of redemption inevitably brings division also.”<sup>v</sup> We are called to be aware that suffering and division happen in our life our discipleship, and yet these experiences are nothing compared to the promise of eternally being in the presence of the Almighty God.

So instead of telling people or yourself: “Everything Happens for a Reason” perhaps think about saying: “God is with you through it all and I know God has not left you and I am here for you.” Even when we do not understand, even when we desperately want to know and understand the will of God, John Wesley said it best with his last breath: “And the best of all is that that is with us.”<sup>vi</sup>

May we continue to care for those who find themselves lost in doubt and questions and those who cannot make meaning out of their lives. Remind them they are created for a purpose and through God’s baptism of fire and water, we too are called to do God’s redemptive work in the world today, come what may. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theodicy>

<sup>ii</sup> Kate Bowler. “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved. Random House. New York New York. 2018. P. 166.

<sup>iii</sup> The United Methodist Hymnal. The United Methodist Publishing House. 1989. P. 37.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. P. 34.

<sup>v</sup> The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press. 1995. P. 266.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://wesleyancovenant.org/2018/12/19/best-of-all-god-is-with-us/>.