

Jan 7 – Epiphany

Sermon: Everything Happens for a Reason

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Most of us as Christians have things we believe, and tell others, and even count on, that we have not carefully examined. Some of the things we accept and repeat to others sound so true, and we have believed them for so long, that they are now above question or criticism. We become defensive or irritated if someone challenges these beliefs.

Among these cherished beliefs of ours are what Adam Hamilton calls “Half Truths.” They are statements of faith that are less than true. We will be examining some of them over the next few weeks. They need to be examined because some of them, when used, hurt people. They may push people away from God. Some are used to avoid careful thinking about complex issues. And unfortunately, some are used to justify our own biases or prejudices. You will not agree with everything I am going to say. Here is a truth, not a half-truth. I will offend everyone, at some point, during this sermon series! When I turn upside down a cherished belief you have, you will not be happy. I just hope you come back the next week because then you might hear words that help you reject a half-truth that has been thrown at you, that has caused you great hurt. Today we are going to look at that half-truth that says “Everything Happens for a Reason.”

Has anyone ever said that to you? Have you said it to another? The statement is true if, in saying it, we mean that we live in a world of cause and effect. Actions create consequences. Our own choices produce results.

Usually when we say, “Everything happens for a reason” we are not talking about cause and effect. Most often, we are speaking in response to suffering. When something bad has happened and we are trying to help someone through a difficult time, we say, “It was meant to be” or “It must have been their time” or “It was part of God’s plan” or “It must have been God’s will.” We seek to console people or others console us by saying that God has a particular purpose for bringing about or at least

allowing situations in which people suffer. We assume that while we don't yet understand why it had to happen, all events in our lives unfold according to God's plan. Since God is in charge of everything, whatever happens reflects the will and purposes of God.

If we extend this logic we can arrive at some extremes that seem silly such as: "God meant for the Seahawks to be beaten by the Cardinals and for Atlanta to win so they would not make the playoffs. There is a reason we don't understand for why they should not be super bowl winners this year." This logic also brings us to some really troubling questions. "What would be God's plan to allow millions of Jews to die in the Holocaust?" or, "Does God really want hundreds to be wounded or killed in a mass shooting?"

The first problem with these trite statements is that it eliminates the concept of personal responsibility. The logic can go like this: "Hitler was not really a monster. His ultimate solution was part of a bigger plan. Or, the last perpetrator of a mass killing was not a terrorist but acting as part of a bigger plan that we don't understand. I am not really at fault. I am just living out God's plan or the Devil made me do it." Without the concept of personal responsibility, there is no incentive to grow in our faith. We respond however we feel like, believing or hoping God is in control. This attitude is used to excuse all sorts of behaviors.

The second problem is that it makes God responsible for everyone's actions and every event in life. It makes God the ultimate micromanager. I have had people come to me saying that they are never going to darken the door of a church again after some great tragedy in their life. Their logic is that if God allowed something like this to happen then God is not a loving God and they want nothing more to do with religion. Blaming God for something dark and horrible that has happened in our lives or in the world; is that realistic?

The reason that "everything happens for a reason" is a half-truth is that we do understand that there are forces and events beyond our comprehension at work in our lives and in the world. We do believe that God is at work and that sometimes the whys

of something happening are beyond us. It is only in hindsight that we can see the bigger picture and begin to understand how wrongly we viewed things from our limited perspective at the time. We also know that sometimes God does intervene and miracles happen. So, some of the time, this passage is true but more often it is, if not false, less than true and it tends to hurt or skew people's perspectives concerning God.

Clearly there are many things that happen in our lives and in the world that stand in direct opposition to what we know to be the thoughts and desires of our kind and loving God. We read about the opioid crisis and the rise in the use of heroin. Do we really believe some greater good is coming out of this travesty? When people die young, particularly infants and children, do we really believe that this is what God would desire? Yet, I have heard people tell grieving parents that their child died because God wanted another flower in God's heavenly garden! We know Jesus came to share a message of love and forgiveness, and yet people say and do hurtful things in the name of religion. We can add to this list child abuse, sexual harassment and earthquakes, devastating fires and so the list goes on and on. No, many things happen that are not of God. Where is the hard truth that the half-truths we proclaim keep us from facing?

First, we believe God gives us the power to choose. Let's go back to that first story of choice contained in the Bible. God places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In that garden is the tree of knowledge. God tells them that they can eat of any tree but that one. At this point in the story you have to decide the motivation of God. Did God place the tree of knowledge in the garden because God already knew that they would eat of its fruit and this is a way to banish them from Paradise? This is not a pretty picture of our God. Or, God placed the tree there and gave us the freedom to choose. God hoped Adam and Eve would make good choices.

See, I believe freedom of choice is a good gift of God. Yes, it can and often is abused. We have a word for when people abuse the gifts of God. We call it sin. Adam and Eve were the first to use their freedom wrongly, to sin. However, see also the power in that gift. When we make the hard choice to do the right thing it is our choice! When we learn from our faith that we should forgive and turn the other cheek, and actually do

it, we can celebrate how we have grown. Freedom of choice allows for growth, for understanding. We are not puppets on a celestial string.

And, when the choice is abused, we learn from that story that there are consequences but also that God is still with us. Adam and Eve left the garden but God still loved them. God gave them garments and watched over them. God is always with us even when we or those around us make poor use of their gift of freedom.

Because of this freedom there is a randomness to life that we find hard to deal with. Sometimes people are in the wrong place at the wrong time and have to deal with the consequences of another's poor choices. I had a cousin who was going to church along with her daughter when an intoxicated man ran a light and hit them killing her and severely crippling her child. Some misguided folk wanted to say it was her time! Fortunately, the pastor at her service talked about the randomness of life. I still remember that theme. It was a pivotal building block in my faith when I was a teenager and, no I don't think God caused her death so I would learn something and become a pastor. People abuse the gift of choice and we sometimes pay the consequences.

Also, in the randomness of life category is the knowledge that we are the recipients, at times, of forces of nature. Last week we celebrated that we live in an orderly world. It is this order that gives us the ability to plan and make decisions. But that same order means that we live on a dynamic crust that moves bringing with it earthquakes and volcanoes. The atmospheric engine that makes life sustainable on our planet also causes hurricanes and tornadoes. And in that randomness of life we know that as the cells in our bodies divide and replicate themselves millions of times during our lifespan, at times the process goes wrong and health issues, like cancer, occur.

Now there are things we can do to mitigate some of these circumstances. We, who live in earthquake areas, can prepare for a disaster and we can make sure our housing is up to the best codes for such situations. We can do things as people to reduce the effects of global warming which is triggering weather that is more violent. We can eat right, exercise and all those other things to help us live well. But still there is randomness.

I think about a woman who never smoked and though her husband smoked he never did it inside. She ate right and exercised and still she developed lung cancer which took her life while her husband never seemingly had any visible effects to the smoking.

We, as a people of faith, proclaim that God can intervene in situations. Miracles are real! Why God chooses to intervene sometimes and not others is a mystery. What is true is that God usually chooses to work with and through us. We become the hands and feet of God when others are going through tough times in their lives.

The picture of God that I have proclaimed today is of a God who does not cause tragedy but is in the midst of that tragedy bringing love and comfort. God who can directly and supernaturally intervene usually works indirectly through people. It is a picture of God who, through the power of Jesus' resurrection, gives us assurance that in the end God is with us and redeems us. So even when we struggle with a random seemingly senseless act we know that we are not alone. God redeems us and will be with those around us giving love and power.

So, don't blame God, be accountable and make good choices and be there for others in times of need.