

“Beyond Clichés: Seeking a Deeper Faith: Everything Happens for a Reason”

Romans 8:18-25, 38-39

May 3, 2020

We’ve heard them all. We have used most of them at one time or another. After all, they are clichés for a reason. Well-worn phrases or oft-repeated aphorisms. Words we might speak to each other without much reflection or scrutiny. They come so quickly to our lips, often bypassing our minds on the way.

For the next three Sundays, as we journey through a time of both personal and collective grief, as we ask difficult questions of God and perhaps are drawn to the greeting card platitudes that come all too easily, we’re going to take a step back. We’re going to wrestle with and reflect on what we say to one another, what we say to ourselves, and how examining these words can lead us into a deeper, sturdier, more authentic faith.

I have found that these clichés are particularly prevalent in times of distress and difficulty. This makes sense. In times like these, we are all trying to find meaning in the struggle; we’re seeking words that tie a bow around the grief and pain and offer comfort. And, sometimes, we’re simply looking for *something* to say when the silence feels too heavy. With the best intentions, we repeat these phrases that must be true because they are ubiquitous, must provide relief because they’ve been used before, must be Scriptural because they sound like something we might have read there.

I want to be clear. My intention in the coming weeks is not to criticize or be dismissive. Instead, I hope to offer an invitation to deep pools of trust beyond the shallow waters of forced optimism. I want to suggest that the difficult questions we are asking in these trying times can be pathways to the profound and opportunities for mutual support and encouragement. If we have the courage to explore them, they might help us hold faith, together. Here we go.

I remember, several years ago, standing next to a friend at a funeral home visitation. My friend’s father had died tragically and unexpectedly. He was obviously uncomfortable, struggling to maintain the energy to greet a long line of friends and neighbors. He wanted to be anywhere else, you could see it in his eyes. A family friend approached and shook his hand. He politely thanked the man for coming to support the family. The man patted him on the shoulder and said, “I know it’s hard right now, son, but in time you’ll see that this was all a part of God’s plan.” The grieving son looked quizzically at this would-be comforter, thanked him, then walked away in tears. What I saw in those tears, and later heard in his voice, was not sadness but bewildered frustration, even anger. Now, I have no doubt that the objective of the visiting friend was noble. I have no doubt he meant to bring comfort. And, at one level, he could be right. Maybe a day will come when this son will reflect on his journey of grief and find that God was walking alongside him. Still, the choice of words brought pain in the moment. The encouragement to see God’s hand in the tragic death of his father was not helpful. The cliché did not hold in the context.

Everything happens for a reason. The words might be true in the scientific realm of cause and effect, action, and reaction. But most often that’s not the way we use the cliché. Usually, we say it in response to suffering. It is a close cousin to other phrases like, “It was meant to be,” “It must have been God’s will,” “It’s all part of the plan.” We seek to bring comfort through the assurance that God has a purpose in every situation of suffering or tragedy. We’ve heard those phrases often lately, and I imagine we can all sympathize with those who have spoken them. I know I can. When people are suffering and the cause is not

clear, we cling to the belief that God has a purpose for that suffering, that it is a part of the divine plan.

Does everything happen for a reason? At the risk of being vague, I want to suggest that the answer is more complex than it might originally seem—that life is more complicated than any bumper sticker theology or miracle-peddling preacher would have us believe.

At the end of March, *Time Magazine* published a piece by the preeminent New Testament scholar and Christian theologian N.T. Wright under this provocative title, “Christianity Offers no Answers about the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To.” Wright responds directly to those who have been quick to tell us all with great certainty why a global pandemic has upended life for the whole of humanity—a punishment, a warning, a sign. In the place of this illusion of certainty or search for a rational explanation, Wright commends *lament*.

I have to admit I was a little disappointed. I was hoping for a grand theological formulation or at least a new interpretation of these enigmatic Biblical texts on the sovereignty of God in light of inexplicable human suffering. Instead, Wright takes us deep into the heart of our Scriptural tradition and reminds us that the picture of God we find there is more complex than we have been led to believe. He writes, “The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That’s not the picture we get in the Bible.”ⁱ

His words took me back to that funeral home in Georgia, and to countless similar situations I’ve encountered in ministry and life. What if we began not with explanation but with lament? What if we acknowledged that airtight theories and pious platitudes tend to collapse under the weight of real-life experience? What would be left for us to say or do if, in this moment of great sadness, we confessed that we human creatures cannot state with certainty the reason for pandemics, earthquakes, forest fires, cancer diagnoses, or tragic accidents?

I return this morning to the eighth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans because I find in his words the kind of searching and seeking that so many of us are engaged in these days. He writes with honesty and clarity about the suffering of this present moment—the groaning of creation itself, the longing of humanity for healing and hope. Paul suggests that what we call hope cannot be hope if it is seen. That is, genuine hope is grounded in something deeper, more profound, than human explanation or rationalism. Christian hope is grounded not in human optimism but in the love of God. It is finally *that* love that survives when all else is torched by the fires of suffering or battered by the onslaught of grief. Years ago, I found words in Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*, that I have found a meaningful replacement for the clichés that only cover our discomfort. Berry writes, “But grief is not a force and has no power to hold. You only bear it. Love is what carries you, for it is always there, even in the dark, or most in the dark, but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery.”ⁱⁱ

This is the picture of God I find in Scripture—the God who comes in human form to live among us and to suffer with and for us. The God who is both sovereign over all creation *and* who offers us the freedom to choose the path of life and hope and love. The God who would *never* intend evil and who could never stay away from those who suffer. The God who gives courage to the weak, strength to the suffering, hope to the hopeless...that’s the God I know. As the old preacher in Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* says, “He will wipe the tears from all faces.’ It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required.”ⁱⁱⁱ

N.T. Wright closes his essay with these words, “As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope.”

On Wednesday morning our Lake Fellows gathered virtually for a seminar with two physicians

in our congregation and a hospital chaplain. I asked these experts to help us in responding to the deep and difficult questions of suffering that all of us are asking now. Jim Lemons, a pediatrician, neonatologist, and professor, spoke of protecting the silence. Sometimes, more is carried on the wings of silence than can be held by mere words. Emily Giesel, a palliative medicine specialist, shared how she describes her practice to medical residents. I thought the description was wise advice for all of us to practice in this time. She said that she tells residents that the primary tool of palliative care is the chair. We listen. We stay present. We don't rush. Then she described her practice as a crockpot process, not microwave cooking. I love that. The next time I am tempted to fill a silence with a glut of words, I'm going to try breathing instead. When I want to explain and rationalize and put a band-aid on the pain of another, I'm going to try to pull up a chair instead. To let the feelings and struggles simmer rather than nuking them.

Here is what I know: bad things, tragic things, devastating things happen. Often, they elude easy explication. They defy all reason and evade understanding. To tie a bow around them with simplistic words about the will of God is to minimize the depth of suffering and to mask the authenticity of our experience. What can we say instead? I think we do well to listen to the words of Paul and to affirm this truth: God is not absent from our deepest pain. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. As Dr. Giesel said, echoing the Song of Solomon, "love is stronger than even death."

I don't believe in the reductionist notion that everything happens for an obvious reason, but I do believe in the movement of God's Spirit and the certain presence of God when we are weakest and most vulnerable. I believe in a God who can't stop showing up. I believe in a God whose will for us is to experience the fullness of life and richness of grace. In the end, hope will defeat despair, and joy will have the final word because it is God's will that joy comes in the morning. And, I believe this. I believe it with all my heart. I rely on it every single day. I have staked

my life on it. I cling to this truth, which is deeper than any convenient cliché. Love is what holds us. Holds us up. Holds us together. Holds us forever. Amen.

ⁱ <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

ⁱⁱ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, Counterpoint Publishing, 2001. pp. 132-133.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (November 19, 2004).