

9-7-25 Sermon: “That’s Not in the Bible!: Everything Happens for a Reason”

Today is our third installment in a sermon series called, “*That’s not in the Bible.*” We are spending some time examining things Christians say that are not actually Biblical – sometimes not actually Christian! – and seeing what the Bible actually says. And today’s installment is: “Everything happens for a reason.”

This week’s aphorism is similar to last week’s “God never gives you more than you can handle,” in that it is another well-intentioned but ultimately harmful platitude. Remember from last week, platitudes are sayings that *sound* true and are intended to offer comfort. But the comfort platitudes offer come at the expense of the person who is suffering.

For example. If we’ve lost a job, or a loved one has just been diagnosed with cancer, and some sweet church person hugs us and says, “It’s ok, honey, everything happens for a reason”...do we feel comforted about the situation? Of course not! No, we feel like slapping our brother or sister in Christ! Or perhaps worse, looking them in eyes and saying, “Bless your heart.”

So hear the good news: “Everything happens for a reason” is NOT in the Bible. But there is a verse – Romans 8:28 – that people often interpret to mean “everything happens for a reason.” And we’ll get to Romans in a minute. First, we need to talk about the question that this platitude is trying to answer: The problem of evil. Or as theologians call it, “theodicy.”

Theodicy is the practice of reconciling a God who is good with the horrible things that happen in our world. In its simplest form, the problem can be posed as three statements, all of which Christians generally believe, but which cannot all be true at the same time:

- 1.) God is all-good.
- 2.) God is all-powerful.
- 3.) Evil exists.

For generations of Christian history, believers have wracked their brains trying to logically solve this problem. You’ve heard some of these arguments before.

There’s Augustine, who said that sin and evil entered the world because God gave humans free will and we messed up. Or there’s Irenaeus, who said that our souls, like our bodies, need to grow and develop. God allows evil because it creates obstacles to overcome and struggles to endure in order to reach spiritual maturity.

Some theodicies are based on eschatological hope: Life is suffering *now*, but we’ll be rewarded later, often in the afterlife. Other theodicies, like the work of Jurgen Moltmann, point to Christ on the cross as God who suffers *with* us and therefore teaches us to suffer with one another and the destitute of the earth.

There’s a newer line of thinking called process theology – based in concepts from physics – that paints God not as the omnipotent worldmaker in the heavens but as a great force here on earth. God’s power is relational – acting on one body, then another – so that even as evil exists God is the force always creation toward that which is good.

I took a semester on all this in seminary – the class was called “God and the Problem of Evil.” And it was absolutely *fascinating*, but (as our professor warned us at the outset), ultimately unsatisfying. Because while we can intellectually assent to one argument or another, none of these arguments really answers the questions we’re asking on an emotional or existential level. “Why me, God?” “How could this bad thing be happening to *me*?”

We can see a little bit of each of these arguments in the writings of the Apostle Paul. And yes, friends, that means it's time to turn to what the Bible *actually* says about reasons and God and evil and how everything happens – Romans chapter 8.

To get into Romans 8, we need a little background on how Paul understands the cosmos. Paul believes that the world is governed by spiritual forces; the force of good, which he calls God, and the force of evil, which he calls Sin or Death. Sin entered the world through humanity – the sin of Adam – but may have already been present at the time of Creation. Its power comes from chaos, from the depths over which the Holy Spirit moved to call the world into being.

According to Paul, God created the world good, but Sin has made its way in and has taken all of creation captive – from humans to birds to the land itself – we are in bondage to Sin and chaos, and therefore we suffer. But in Jesus Christ, God has begun the process of redeeming the whole world. And because Sin came into the world through humankind, God is using humanity as the force through which God will redeem the world. First Jesus, and then all of us, as we are adopted and transformed into the image of Christ. We are still very much in process, and this is a time of suffering – Paul calls it “groaning in labor pains” – but eventually, we will see ourselves and creation fully restored. *That's* what's going on in Romans, chapter 8.

And that brings us to this tricky little verse, Romans 8:28. The NRSV that JoAnn just read translates the Greek like this: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” I can see how that sounds like, “Everything happens for a reason.”

But if you look in your Bible, there's a footnote, that says “other ancient authorities” – in this case the older and perhaps more accurate texts – translate it this way: “*God* makes all things work together for good,” or “In all things God works for good.”

Those older manuscripts include the word, “God,” which becomes the subject of the sentence. The newer manuscripts that were eventually codified into the Bible we read today left God out. Oops!

But even beyond that, there's something going on with the verbs here. I'm not going to walk you through the specific words and something called “dative participles,” (ask me afterwards, if you're curious). But what I'll say is this: Based on the work of the best Greek scholars I know, what Romans 8:28 really conveys is this:

“We know that in all things, God is working together – *co-operating* – for good *with* those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”

That's a little different – isn't it? – than “Everything happens for a reason.” Instead of God, the great puppet master in the sky, orchestrating things according to God's secret plan, we get something like Moltmann's God-incarnate Jesus Christ, working and suffering alongside us. We get something like process theology's God of relational force, God the Holy Spirit, drawing out what is best in creation, working for the good in all things – groaning and laboring with sighs too deep for words.

And, we get a job to do. Did you notice that? In all things, God is working for good – *with* us, the ones who love God. If we want to see the redemption of creation, we'd best get to work.

In that class I took on God and the problem of evil, there was one line of thinking we studied that was radically unlike the others. And that was the work of womanist theology – theology based on the lived experience of black women.

The daughters of enslaved people argued that we don't have *time* to sit back and pontificate the logical cause and reasoning of evil in world. If we trust in a loving God, our job is

to do something about it. And not in a stoic, “buck up and get on with it” kind of way; no, friends, these texts are full of weeping and wailing and crying out to God – this is the theology of the spirituals! There is a troubling in our souls, the womanists say, so we will weep, and we will wail...and then we will get to work.

I like the womanist approach because it’s the only one that honors our *experience* of suffering. And it’s the only one that does something about it.

And it seems to me that this is *exactly* what is going on in Romans, chapter 8. Creation is groaning in labor pains; the Holy Spirit is interceding for us with sighs too deep for words. This is weeping, this is wailing: we and all of creation are crying out to God, and then – we go get involved. We get our hands dirty. We get to work.

To claim that “Everything happens for a reason” is a little bit defeatist. It removes us from the problem of evil; it abdicates emotional involvement and moral responsibility. But friends, that’s not what Christians are called to do.

So let’s go get involved in this beautiful mess of a world that God has created. Amen.