

9-17-17 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“DOES EVERYTHING REALLY HAPPEN FOR A REASON?”

Pastor Becky Smithey

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20a

[Read Deuteronomy 30:15-18]

So we're starting a new series this week called, "Answering the Hard Questions," where we will take a look at certain common phrases shared among Christians that sound Biblical and maybe hold some truth about the faith, but which don't tell the whole story. And I'll just go ahead and give you all a little hint up front by letting you know that none of the phrases we are going to talk about over the next few weeks are actually in the Bible. This week, we're going to be thinking about the meaning of the phrase, "Everything happens for a reason." Now there are some variations on this phrase, like, "It was the will of God," or "It was meant to be," or "This was part of God's plan," or "It must've been their time," which we hear a lot at the time of someone's death, especially when that death is unexpected or untimely.

As we begin to give some thought to what it means to say, "Everything happens for a reason," let's listen to a Scripture reading this morning from the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. This is near the end of Moses' life, and Moses is preparing to leave the Israelites, sort of paving the way for Joshua to take over leadership and guide the Israelites into the Promised Land, and Moses says to the Israelites:

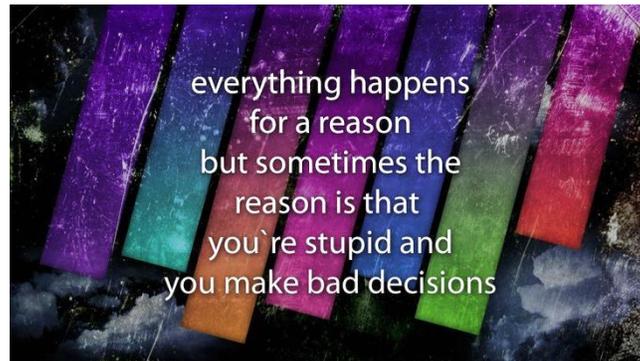
[Read Deuteronomy 30:19-20a]

I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—by loving the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him.

Now, we'll come back to that passage in a few minutes, but I want us to think for a minute about what is meant or implied when it is said that, "Everything happens for a reason." What is the message that comes across through that phrase? Or think about it this way, what or how would you feel if you had just been through a really rough patch in your life, and someone says to you, "Everything happens for a reason." How would that make you feel? [*Maybe allow for answers.*] The problem with this phrase is what's implied, more than what's said. The implication, particularly when a Christian says something like this, is that whatever is happening is the will of God, that it's part of God's plan. So, the earthquake in Haiti back in 2010 that killed about a quarter of a million people; it was God's will that those people would die, or that that was part of God's plan. Or it was just meant to be when a two year old in Wal-Mart pulled a gun out of his mother's purse, and thinking he was playing with a toy, discharged the weapon, killing his mom. "It must've been her time." You begin to see how difficult it is to believe in a God who is good, a God like the one described in Romans 8, who we know in so

many ways works for good in the world, but who at the same time wills so much that is bad. These two ideas just don't jive, they don't fit together.

So what we're going to talk about today are some of the problems behind this statement, "Everything happens for a reason." Although we need to acknowledge the truth here, everything does happen for a reason, but look at this meme I ran across on the internet this week. It says, "Everything happens for a reason. But sometimes the reason is that you're stupid and make bad decisions."



...Which brings us to the first problem with this phrase, "Everything happens for a reason." If everything happens for a reason, and that reason is nothing more than it was part of the will or plan of God, then that completely removes personal responsibility. So you go and cheat on your spouse, and then you explain that it was simply part of God's plan. Or you're texting and driving, and you cause a wreck that kills someone, and you just say, "It was their time." So not only are we free from responsibility, but also, all of a sudden, God is the cause of all the bad in the world. And think about how such thinking would affect decisions in our lives. If we're going to die anyway, what's the point in eating right, or exercising? Or if it's God's will that we get cancer, then going to the doctors for medical treatment would actually be working against God's plan. Or, if God had already planned that OSU would win this week, then what's the point in the opposing team practicing? I don't think I need to explain to you that this is simply not rational.

Now there are some who believe that God does work in this way in the world; that every single thing that happens is known and planned by God. This belief emerges as one interpretation of the idea of God's sovereignty, God's rule over creation and over our lives. All Christians believe that God is sovereign, though beliefs about what exactly "sovereign" means vary widely. So, we have this God who controls every intricate detail within creation, and our choices or decisions are already determined by God and will make no difference in any outcome. John Calvin, one of the great Reformers, and the sort of father of the Presbyterian faith was a big proponent of this idea. You might have heard of it referred to as predestination, or fatalism. This would be what I would consider an extreme view of God's providence or sovereignty. And on the other extreme is something called Deism, which was held by many of our nation's founding fathers (Thomas Jefferson and others). Deism says that God is like a clockmaker. In creation, God made all things and set them into motion, but then God stepped away and has no involvement with anything that subsequently happens in the world.

You can probably easily identify the immediate problems with these two views. We already know the problem with Deism, and the idea that God is not involved with creation, which is the fact that about 2,000 years ago, God took on flesh and came and dwelled among us in the person of Jesus Christ. God became intimately involved with the life of humanity through Jesus Christ—walking in our shoes, healing our afflictions, forgiving our sins, even dying our death. That’s not something you do from afar. And, of course, the predestination or fatalism on the other extreme, that completely removes us from the equation. Why would God create us to be in relationship with him when God has already determined whether or not each person will have a relationship with him? Why even bother creating the people who will not be in a relationship with God? Indeed, there is some comfort in believing that God is in control of everything, but it can be taken to such an extreme that it removes all possibility of free-will on our part. If you remember, after God created Adam and Eve, he instructed them to “fill the earth and subdue it.” God gave the humans dominion over the birds and the animals and every living thing. So, even from the very beginning, we can see that God is in control, but we still have responsibility, and even freedom to make choices about how we will live our lives and how we will live in relationship to God. You could think of it like a Fitbit. A Fitbit can give you information about how many steps you have taken or whatever, but a Fitbit can’t make you go walk, you have to make that decision and take that action on your own. It’s the same way with God. God rules in our hearts and in our lives. God has instructed us through the Bible, through Christ, and even through one another how we should live our lives, but ultimately the decision is ours, and we can’t blame God for our bad decisions.

Listen again to Moses’ words from our Scripture reading this morning: “I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—by love the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That’s how you will survive and live long...” So Moses has just finished reminding the Israelites of all the Law and the Ten Commandments and so forth. And now he says to them in essence, “Look. I’ve told you what’s good and what’s bad. I’ve told you the way that will lead to life and the way that will lead to destruction. So choose the good, cling to God, and you will live.” If we didn’t have a choice; if everything that happened was only according to God’s design, completely apart from any personal decisions we make, why would Moses set this choice before the Israelites?

Some things happen for a reason, or happen as part of God’s plan or God’s will, but not everything. Sometimes things happen, good and bad, because of the choices we make. There will be times in our lives when we go through rough patches or disappointments, times when we suffer. And sometimes that suffering will be the result of a poor decision we made on our own. But God does not will that we would suffer. God does not want us to suffer. And even in the midst of suffering, there are times when God will work to bring good through that situation as Romans 8 tells us.

There was a woman who lost her three year old son when he was hit by a car. Some years later, she was asked to reflect on her faith in light of that experience. Here’s what she wrote:

“At the time, I had people tell me that, ‘It was your son’s time.’ And I was having a hard time believing in a God who would plan to take my child at age three. I learned that tragedies weren’t necessarily part of God’s plan, but that God gave us free will and sometimes bad things happen. Understanding this helped me turn to God instead of away from him.”

“Since my son’s death, I believe that my faith has grown and continues to grow. His death changed the way I viewed God and my faith. I no longer have a naïve childlike faith where God protects you from all harm and makes everything okay. It is a deeper faith that has been tested through tragedy. I know that God doesn’t promise me a pain free life, but he does always promise to be there: to love me, and comfort me, and guide me. My faith gives me something that people without faith don’t have: HOPE. Hope for the future, and hope for the knowledge that I will see my son again someday.”

We need to move beyond the simplistic faith that says that everything happens for a reason, and we need to understand the complexity of God’s work in this world. Between the idea of a micro-manager God who leaves no room for free will and a clockmaker God who has no involvement in the things going on in the world, is the truth about our God. God created us and gave us freedom. And this world is a beautiful and magnificent part of God’s creation, but sometimes it is dangerous, and sometimes in our freedom we make poor and even destructive choices that cause harm to ourselves or to others. But God walks with us through the pain we experience. God doesn’t will it, God doesn’t want it to happen, but when these things happen, God promises not to let us go.

Sometimes things happen for a reason, but that reason isn’t always God. Sometimes good things happen when we open ourselves up and allow God to use us. And sometimes bad things happen because we make bad decisions, or others make bad decisions. But regardless, God promises that he will never leave us nor forsake us; that he will walk with us through the pain and force it to accomplish something good. That is our hope, the hope we have in Christ. And that is there for a reason!