

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Stop Saying These Things!

Sermon: Everything Happens For A Reason

Deuteronomy 30:19-20a (NIV)

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.

Sermon

I was born in August, 1973. It was supposed to be September. But I showed up a month early, ready for the world. Trouble was, my lungs were not. Not quite there. The doctors took me from the delivery room without my parents able to hold me at all and put me in iron lung machine that helped me breathe. I had a 50-50, if I made it 24 hours, chances are I was going to be alright. My parents got to hold me that evening through the special gloves that reached into the contraption. A lot of tears. A lot of prayers. Maybe even a little bargaining with God. If you let him live . . . we'll do such and such. Maybe you've had such prayers yourself. We'll go to church every Sunday, we'll dedicate him to you. Whatever you do, just let him live. You might have guessed, but I made it. And somewhere, a family member might say nowadays, "See, Everything happens for a reason." See, he's a pastor, this is why God let him live. Thank God I didn't choose accountancy - or it might have been a different story.

Everything happens for a reason. You've heard that phrase before, maybe even said it a time or two. Lord knows I have. And it is somewhat true, isn't it? We do live in a world of cause and effect. Everything does happen for a reason. Our choices produce certain results. If I drop my phone, it could break. If I drink too much soda, I get bigger. If I don't pay the car payment, they come and take the car. I had someone in my office during the last Recession, Pastor Mike, why did I get foreclosed on? All I knew to say was, "did you pay your house payment?" They answered, No. I wanted to say, "OK, I know why you got foreclosed on." Maybe they were looking for a more spiritual answer, like why did God let me get foreclosed on, but really, it's a no-brainer. Cause and effect. Someone else in my office, long time ago now. "Why did my teenage daughter get pregnant?" Again, it's an easy answer. We know how these things happen? I asked, was she and boyfriend fooling around? Of course, was the answer. Then it's not really a surprise. You just won the baby lottery - which has better odds than you realize before you play. It's only a surprise pregnancy if they weren't fooling around - then you can say it's a surprise! Cause-effect. So, everything really does happen for a reason, but that's not how we usually use the sentence.

"Everything happens for a reason." Now there are some other 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. "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? 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 its part of God's plan. So, the earthquake in Haiti back in 2010 that killed about a quarter of a million people; it's 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 a 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.” This Pandemic must be part of God’s Plan, because it’s happening. If that’s the case, we shouldn’t try to stop it, should we?

Here’s the first problem with this phrase: 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. I don’t think he or she is buying that one. 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.

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. Let’s just see how this all plays out.

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. Or if God doesn’t act in the world today, what’s the point of prayer? Why acknowledge God at all, if He doesn’t seem to care? And, of course, with 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.

Listen 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 loving 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. I like how Romans 8 puts it: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

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. And the family of God said, Amen.