

Everything Happens for a Reason?
Genesis 45:1-11, 15
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We continue our sermon series today by exploring the saying Everything Happens for a Reason. We may not attribute these words to Jesus, but these words get tossed around such that they are often heard as gospel.

There is truth in this saying, of course. Actions create consequences. If you are playing catch in the living room and the ball hits your mother's favorite vase, it will fall and break. Usually, however, we hear this phrase in response to suffering or when the unexpected happens. Everything happens for a reason. It must have been God's will. It was part of God's plan.

For some, these are comforting words- words that bring a measure of comfort in the midst of chaos. For others, these words are painful. At the Presbytery meeting this week, Rob Spach, chaplain at Davidson College, spoke of his years counseling college students who have experienced unimaginable pain and tragedy. For many such students to hear, "Everything happens for a reason." or "It is all part of God's plan", leaves them drawing one of three conclusions: 1) There is no God. 2) God's plan is monstrous, or 3) There is no plan. To say "everything happens for a reason," particularly to someone who is suffering can be, to use Ellen's words, one of those "occasions when the grace that saves us gets lost or turned around as we carry it out into the world."

Our reading today is from Genesis. This passage is towards the end of the Joseph saga- a saga that includes much suffering, betrayal, and grief. To understand the reading today, we need to back up to the beginning. Of all Jacob's sons, Joseph, the second to the youngest son, is the obvious favorite, the first born of Jacob's favorite and beloved wife, Rachel. As I recalled in the Children's Time, Joseph is a dreamer and at the age of 17, he is rather cocky and obnoxious. Joseph tells his family of a dream in which they all bow down to him. His father is not pleased; his brothers, for whom this is the last straw, are murderously angry. They decide to kill him but pull back from that plan. They throw him into a pit, sell him into slavery, and then tear his coat and put goat's blood on it, hiding their crime but convincing their father that Joseph is dead. Jacob is devastated.

In Egypt, Joseph soon finds himself in prison on a false charge. There his love of dreams and interpretation comes in handy. Joseph interprets a dream for Pharaoh himself, telling him that seven years of good crops will be followed by seven years of famine. Soon Joseph is not only out of prison, he has earned himself a position in government overseeing food production and famine preparation. He is second only to Pharaoh in power. He is married and has children. Life is good. Whatever he does, God makes it prosper.

Years later, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt. There is a famine back home too and they are hungry. In Egypt, the brothers do not recognize Joseph and Joseph puts them

through their paces. He demands to see the youngest brother, Benjamin, Rachel's other son. Joseph frames Benjamin for theft and says that Benjamin must stay with him as a slave.

At that point, Judah, one of the older brothers, offers himself as a slave instead. He tells the tragic story of the old father still mourning the loss of Joseph and says, "How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father." And that is the last verse of Chapter 44.

Today's reading begins with the first verse of Genesis 45. I will read selected verses.

This story quickly moves to a good ending. There is reconciliation between the brothers and the tears of agony are replaced with tears of joy as the brothers embrace and talk. But make no mistake- this is a story of family trauma- trauma that travels through the generations. Families torn apart by parents' favoritism and children's jealousy and greed: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau. Now Jacob's own family. Jacob, Rachel, and Leah, one of Jacob's other wives, all suffer in their own ways that lead to this unique constellation of siblings and parents. There is death and disappearances, guilt and regret. Yes, there has been great success for Joseph. Yet Joseph has had to live with the memory of betrayal and of the life and father from which he was torn. He too suffers.

But everything happens for a reason-or so we hear. This seems to be the perfect story to back up that notion. Let's look at Joseph's words.

At first, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, the brothers are speechless. They are not happy to hear that the second in command to Pharaoh turns out to be the brother they threw into a pit and sold to a passing caravan, and whose coat they bloodied to pretend he was dead. Guilt. Regret. Fear. Joseph sees it all in their faces and he reframes the story.

"Don't be distressed," he says. "Don't be angry with yourselves. Yes, I am your brother. Yes, you sold me into slavery but God sent me ahead of you to preserve life.... to preserve a remnant on earth.... So it was not you who sent me here, but God." God sent me ahead of you to preserve life, Joseph says. The God of whom he speaks is the God of life, the God who is for life. A God whose intention it is that God's covenant people survive and who will ensure their survival.

But does that necessarily mean that the betrayal, the violence, the lying, the suffering, and the grief were all part of God's plan-that all of it happened for a reason? Or is it that God's plan for life, God's intention that God's covenant people survive is not defeated by the violent actions of the brothers- That somehow God is at work for his purpose in spite of, through, and against every human effort, weaving all that happens in this story, into the "improvisation of salvation," as Biblical scholar Sib Towner describes it?ⁱ

Joseph knows nothing of these questions. This story does not analyze or explain the doctrine of providence. It affirms, relishes even, the hidden and mysterious purpose of God, but it does not explain.

“Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here,” Joseph tells his brothers, “for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

This is how Joseph reframes this story. Even with all the questions his words may raise for us, Joseph’s interpretation of what has happened is powerful. He has created meaning out of his life’s story, out of his suffering-being betrayed by his own kin, sold into slavery, his unjust imprisonment. Joseph has created meaning out of all that and told a story that makes it all worth it.

Perhaps God did send Joseph for just this reason and that God directed it all. But whether or not that is true, to say it aloud is up to Joseph. People who suffer may ultimately be able to find meaning in their experience...Or they may not. The phrase “senseless killing” exists because at some level, we accept that some things do not make sense. ⁱⁱ

As people of faith, we worship a God to whom we may pray, cry, accuse, or rage about our suffering and our lives. And in those faith filled conversations, we may find that some good came out of it, “some blossom in the refuse of destruction” and pain... and we get to testify to it if that is our experience. That is our right and privilege. Or we may not find a blossom in it all. We may come to rest in the limbo that there is no answer for what we are facing. And that is OK too. What is not our right and privilege is to interpret someone else’s suffering for them- to tell **them**, everything happens for a reason.

Kate Bowler, an associate professor at Duke Divinity School, was 35 years old and the mother of an infant son when she was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer. She writes about her experience:

“...most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos. Even when I was still in the hospital, a neighbor came to the door and told my husband that everything happens for a reason.”

“I’d love to hear it,” he replied.

“Pardon?” she said startled.

“The reason my wife is dying,” he said....the neighbor stammered something, handed him a casserole, [and left].” ⁱⁱⁱ

Bowler includes “Everything happens for a reason” in a list of things one should never say to people experiencing a terrible time. She writes,

The only thing worse than saying this, is pretending that you know the reason. I’ve had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons.... When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason. ^{iv}

“It’s awful, isn’t it. Loving someone who is suffering and not having a life preserver you can throw to them? That’s the crux of the problem.” But as pastor Patricia Raube writes, “...love does not require that we throw a life preserver- especially if it is in the form of well-intended words that can hurt, because they imply either that [the person] is responsible for their own suffering, or that we know the will of God. God, too, makes meaning, but in God’s time.”

We can say something else like, “This is awful.” “Let me take your children for a play date.” or “This sounds so hard.” Or we can even allow for silence, honoring the terrible in the midst of life which can be so beautiful.”^v

We human longs for order, for harmony, for reasons. Sometimes we even get them! A year after Kate’s diagnosis she wrote:

The most I can say about why I have cancer, medically speaking, is that bodies are delicate and prone to error. As a Christian, I can say that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here, and so we get sick and die. And as a scholar, I can say that our society is steeped in a culture of [shallow] reasoning.”^{vi}

Today, Bowler hosts a podcast called simply, “Everything Happens.”

Friends, whether you find comfort in believing that everything happens for a reason, that everything that happens is part of God’s plan or not, “when those we love are suffering [from disease, tragedy, or simply an unwelcomed and unexpected life change,] the truly loving thing to do is to let them, like Joseph, find meaning on their own timetable.

We can show them our love in ways that don’t interpret their lives. And we can be with them- just be with them- in the beautiful and terrible thing that is living. And [our faithful] God, in God’s infinite wisdom and love, will be with us, [with all of us, amid all the suffering and the joy of life, even to the end of the age.”^{vii} This I believe with certainty!

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

I am indebted to Patricia Raube for her insights in shaping this sermon.

ⁱ Towner, Sibley. *Genesis*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.) p.291.

ⁱⁱ Raube, Patricia. *Is that in the Bible?*

ⁱⁱⁱ Bowler, Kate. *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. (New York: Random House, 2018) p. 113.

^{iv} Ibid. pg. 170.

^v Raube, Patricia.

^{vi} Bowler, Kate. *Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me*. NY Times, February 13, 2016.

^{vii} Raube