



Westbury
United Methodist Church

Half Truths: Everything Happens for a Reason

September 20, 2015 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst

*John 11: A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2 This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." 4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." 5 Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. 6 When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, 7 he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again." 8 The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?" 9 Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. 10 But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them." 11 He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." 12 The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." 13 They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death. 14 Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. 15 For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him." 16 Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus." 17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. 19 Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." 23 Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. 26 Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world." 28 After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. 30 He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb. 32 When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." 33 When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. 34 He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to cry. 36 The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" 38 Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." 40 Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" 41 So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. 42 I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." 43 Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." 45 Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Sometimes, I get to thinking that the news is too much. That because of all the violence and tragedy that we see or hear or read every day, we are all desensitized to just how awful some of these things really are. Sometimes, I think that. But then something happens--I hear or see something that just punches me in the gut, and even though the tragedy isn't mine, per se, it reaches something deeper.

It happened this week. On Tuesday morning I was driving my girls to school when I found out that a school bus had gone hurtling over an overpass. I thought I was going to have to pull over. The haunting horror of an event like that shook me.

We are spending this fall looking at clichés that get thrown around in our culture, and it's in moments like that school bus on Tuesday, or following the death of the 3-year-old Syrian refugee boy who died at sea as his family tried to escape and find peace, or in our own lives when a disease gets diagnosed, or a job is lost, or a relationship ends, it's often in the worst moments of our lives that this week's cliché gets used--like one of those little white ring life preservers, this little bitty flotation device to keep you from drowning in the water of suffering, it comes when someone tries to comfort you, or perhaps to comfort themselves, by saying, "Everything Happens for a Reason."

Everything happens for a reason.

That's what we say. And we say it because we hope against hope that maybe--just maybe--this suffering, this senseless act or unexplainable event, maybe it will all make sense some day. Maybe one day we will understand what right now is incomprehensible. Maybe it will be easier to accept. Maybe our suffering won't be wasted, but it will one day have purpose.

There is some truth in this. This saying really does get us halfway, but it gets locked up in a couple of problems. "Everything Happens for a reason" implies that God is moving all of the pieces on every action and every occurrence in this world. It implies that God controls everything, including us. It implies that God sets up circumstances--that God causes moral failures and engine failures, that God arranges things like faulty electrical wires and drivers who have had too much to drink. It implies that everything--every thing that happens on this earth is God's will.

William Sloane Coffin was the well-known preacher at Riverside Church in New York, and his own son died at the age of 24 after driving off a bridge during a storm. And the following week, Dr. Coffin was back in the pulpit at Riverside, and in his sermon, he said this: "The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

Friends, not everything on Earth is God's will. To believe so leads us to two things: First, it leads us to fatalism. It leads us to wonder why we should bother trying to change anything. If God is controlling everything, including us, and if everything that happens is exactly how God would have it, then why should we pray for guidance? Why should we wear our seatbelts? Why

should we ever go to the doctor? If what's meant to happen is going to happen, then none of this makes sense any more, and we can resign ourselves to just let the rest play out and see what this blessed and monstrous God will carry out. Fatalism. Apathy.

The second thing it leads to is avoiding responsibility for our own decisions. There's a great internet meme floating around out there that simply says this: "Everything happens for a reason; but sometimes the reason is because you're stupid and you make bad decisions." Sometimes the decisions aren't necessarily BAD decisions, but they are decisions that come with a risk. Every time we sit down in a pile of metal and hurtle it down a road alongside other piles of metal, we are taking a known risk. Every day someone smokes a cigarette or eats yet another plate of fried food, they are taking a risk that they will develop health problems as a result. We can't blame God for our own choices, our own decisions; and very often, it's our decisions and the decisions of others that cause the greatest tragedy.

So often, we struggle as we swing between two extremes--between the God [over here] who controls every last thing, each of our moments, and the absentee landlord God [over here] who simply created the Earth and got out of here. But neither of these are attested to in scripture. What we find in scripture is something in between. We find a God who created heaven and earth, who is all-powerful, but who gave away power in its creation. If God really wanted to control Adam and Eve in the garden, then God would have never made the tree and its fruit! God gave them responsibility, God gave them power, and God gave them freedom. And so God also gives us the same--power to make our own determinations, our own choices, good or bad. God offers us the very same thing that God offered Adam--partnership in the workings of God's world.

So what's the whole truth? When we push past the half-truth, what do we get? What do we have to cling to in moments of tragedy, in moments when nothing in this world makes sense because we have lost so much, what do we have then?

Two things, I think. First, God is with us.

It's what we find again and again in scripture, God is with God's people in suffering. In the incarnation of Jesus, we find God's fullest revelation, the fullest understanding of God that we can know, the clearest picture we can find of who God is, and that picture is a picture of God with us, God with us in the suffering, God with us in the car, God with us in the emergency room, God with us in the funeral home. God is there, with us. God does not run from suffering. God does not airlift us out of suffering. God does not promise that we won't have suffering. God promises to be with us in suffering.

But here's the second part: the whole truth is not that God foreordained that terrible things would happen in our lives in order to fulfill some purpose. Rather, the whole truth that we ought to tell one another is that God can work with this. In the worst of circumstances, God can work with this. In the worst tragedy, God can still work with this. Even in the face of death, God can work with this.

Jesus came upon the scene where his dear friend Lazarus had died, and his heart broke, and he wept. Emmanuel, God with us, weeping for the loss that he, too, feels. But that wasn't it for Lazarus. Because that wasn't it for Jesus. Jesus arrived at that tomb, that place of such finality, and he looked at the stone lying against the grave, and I imagine he looked on that tragic scene, and he held out his hands and said, "I can work with this."

God can work with this. God can work with this. God can redeem whatever it is that you have gone through. Whatever has been done to you, whatever you have suffered, even the worst of tragedies-- God can make something of it that you cannot imagine. God did not make it happen in order to prove some point, but God sure can make something beautiful come out of it.

God can work with this. God has shown us again and again, God can work with anything. It's good news for all of us! When you have messed up so badly that you wonder how God could ever redeem a mess like this--when you start talking like Moses, saying, "But you don't understand, Lord, don't you know who I am, don't you know what I've done?" God looked at Moses from that burning bush and said, "Yeah, I know. But I can work with that." God looked at Abraham and Sarah--old, washed up, way too old to bear one child, let alone be the father and mother of nations--God looked at them and said, "I can work with this." God looked at David after committing adultery and murder and falling flat on his face with shame, God looked at David and said, "I can work with this!" Jesus looked up in the tree at Zaccheus and said, "I can work with this--Zaccheus, I'm coming to your house!" This is what God does--God takes what is tragic, what is shameful, what has caused us to suffer, and God says, "I can work with this! I can make something beautiful here. I can redeem this pain.

And perhaps we see it most profoundly on the cross. Jesus goes with confidence into suffering, face to face with death, into the God-forsaken place, to the place and the time and the moment where we are sure that God cannot be, where we are sure that God has left and hope is completely gone, Jesus goes there, into the tomb, to the very gates of hell and says, "Yes." "YES. God can work with this. Even this. A new day is coming, and the son will rise." And friends, if God can look in the face of death and say, 'I can work with this,' then surely God can work with whatever life hand us.

Not everything happens for a reason. Not everything makes sense in this world. We encounter senseless tragedy and violence every day. Things happen to us and to people we love, and we may never understand why. But those tragedies, those sufferings--they are not the end of the story. They are not a period at the end of the sentence, friends, they are just a comma--a pause in the sentence, just long enough for us to weep, to take a breath, and to say with confidence that God can work with this. This sentence, this story isn't over yet. Soon enough, we'll come to the part where there is a resurrection, where all is healed and our tears are wiped away, and the world will be whole again.

Amen? Amen.