

**Everything Happens\*\*\***  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Mary Koon**  
**August 8, 2021**

Prayer: Open the eyes of our hearts, O God, to reveal the truth of your love found in scripture this morning, that we might more closely express your compassion and grace to our neighbor and ourselves. AMEN

Today we'll be reading from the Gospel of John and Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

**John 9: 1–5 (The Message translation)**

<sup>1-2</sup> Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

<sup>3-5</sup> Jesus said, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.

**Romans 8: 18–25**

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in\*hope we were saved.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good\*for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. AMEN

Suffering is part of the human condition. We struggle to make sense of things that happen in our lives in order to assure ourselves that life has order and that we maybe have some control. And when someone we care about faces hard times, we long to be helpful and supportive.

Sooner or later, most, if not all, of us run up against the why? Why is this happening to me or to someone I love? Why did this painful thing occur when God is good and loving and powerful? In the church, this is what we call theodicy, in a nutshell, why does evil exist in a good world?

To be clear, I am not speaking of the why of natural consequences. We know that if you put your hand on a hot stove, you will get burned. Science can often explain why cancers occur in some people, for instance, or how pandemics spread. We are thankful for great minds in physics, biology, chemistry who have helped us move forward in healthcare.

It's the existential why that can haunt us. As in, why is this happening... what did I or they do to deserve this, God?

And maybe you, like me, have thought or even offered as consolation the words, "everything happens for a reason."

I approach this message this morning with a lot of caution for a couple of reasons. I do not want to minimize anyone's experience of suffering, hard is hard. Life does not come wrapped in a box with a pretty bow. And I am also sensitive to triggering more pain for those who are already hurting.

But I want to name aloud that it's been a rough few weeks around here. As a church community, we have faced unexpected deaths and hospitalizations, and I know that many of you have family members or close friends who are sick and hurting. The pandemic continues on and

anxiety about the Delta variant and what that means to our person-to-person ministry is significant. And all this comes after 18 tiring months of adjustments and hardships.

Acknowledging what's hard, bringing these cares to God, and sharing with loving community feels faithful and helpful.

Just so there's no suspense here... I do not believe that everything happens for a reason. God doesn't cause cancer, accidents, illness or trials. The Bible, my understanding of Jesus, my theology, and lived experience tell me that suffering and pain are not the result of God trying to teach or punish or show off.

I believe that God is present in our suffering, that our lives have meaning and that tremendous good can come out of tragedy. We can learn and grow from terrible circumstances. But growth, learning, and good are not the reasons for tragedy.

The Bible is full of stories that show how God's people try to make sense of what it means to love God and others in a world where there is pain and suffering of all kinds. (A tiny list here...woman washing Jesus' feet, Jesus says don't worry, Jesus' beatitudes, Matt 25.)

The text from John is a piece of a larger story found in chapter 9, in which a blind man sees. In its larger context, the story highlights spiritual and physical sight, but this little portion speaks to our topic today.

In the Jewish tradition of Jesus' day, people believed that there were two causes for illness, the sin of the parents that resulted in the sickness of a child, and the sin of a fetus in utero.

"Who sinned to make this man blind?" the disciples ask. That's not how people get sick, Jesus says. More importantly, he tells the disciples that

they are asking the wrong question. Focusing on the why takes our focus from where God is working in the midst of the hurt.

Why, then, do we continue to question today? I think we do this to comfort ourselves, or to believe that we have some power over the things that threaten to tear our lives apart. We may look for reasons that suffering happens to others in order to avoid that pain ourselves. And as a culture, we have a low tolerance for ambiguity and holding more than one truth at once.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, Paul, says that everything works for good for those who love God. This is one of the references we make when faced with challenges. I know I have! But what might this mean when things aren't so good? That we aren't loving God enough? Or have failed in our faith?

I added the verses that come before the “everything works for good,” to put them in context. Paul is in the midst of a sermon about the culmination of time. He knows the people are suffering in the present and assures them that God is with them and it will all work out... just maybe not right now. Yet he concludes the chapter with tremendous words of hope... we often read them at funeral services. Paul assures us that nothing in life or death... nothing in all creation, not on earth or in heaven, can separate us from God's love in Christ. Period.

Kate Bowler is a Duke Divinity School professor, author and speaker. At the age of 35, her career was on the rise, she had given birth to a baby boy after years of infertility and was married to the love of her life, her high school sweetheart. And then she was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

In her academic life, historian Kate studied the American prosperity gospel, the theology that says that God wants to reward you if you have

the right kind of faith. You can pray away any illness or misfortune. Bowler feels that even if you are not a part of one of these churches, just living in the American culture, we breathe in the idea that virtue and success go hand in hand. A big home means you've worked hard, a pretty wife means you are rich, reading the NY Times means you are smart. (p 20)

Bowler's first memoir is about her experience with cancer, titled *Everything Happens for a Reason and other lies I've loved*.

In it she describes the powerful witness of those who showed up to cook for her, to pray with her, weep with her, laugh with her, sit with her during her surgery and treatments. She reflects on her trust in God. She meditates about her love for her son and husband and what it might mean to leave them. In a recent podcast, Kate shared that in talking to her son, who is now 5 years old, she assured him that there is not a world in which their love does not exist. And... Bowler shares comments and attitudes that were not helpful in her suffering.

She writes, "My inbox is full of strangers giving reasons. People offer them to me like wildflowers they picked up along the way. A few people want me to cultivate spiritual acceptance. But 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 effectively ending the conversation. (112-113)

She asks, what would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, "You are limitless." Everything is not possible. The kingdom of God is not here yet. What if being people of

“the gospel” meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough.” (21)

In the end it all comes down to love. Each time we baptize someone, like we did with Liberty and Aydin today, we proclaim that “we are here to declare that God loves these children and we offer ourselves as the instrument of that love in their lives.”

We are called to be God’s love in the world.

Life is a big old love lab and we continue to learn our whole lives.

God’s plan for us all is for us to love God and one another, to do justice, act mercifully and walk humbly with God. It is a plan for the flourishing of humans and the earth. It is not a plan of testing or punishing.

So, how is it, then, that we can more effectively show love and support each other through good times and bad?

Bowler helpfully ends her memoir with list of do’s and don’ts for relating to people when they are sick and suffering.

The first list is called, “Absolutely never say this to people experiencing terrible times.” I offer you a few of my favorites...

Never say, “Well, at least”... don’t minimize. Hard is hard. Or “In my long life, I’ve learned...” Bowler encourages us to remember that life is a privilege, not a reward. Avoid, “it’s going to get better, I promise.” You really cannot promise. Please don’t say “God needed an angel,” this makes God look sadistic and needy. And finally, “everything happens for a reason.” She writes, “When someone is drowning the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.”

The second list is called “Give this a go... see how it works: a Short List”

Offer something of yourself, a bit of food, a plant, a stuffed animal, a funny video, a care. Say, “you are a beautiful person,” tell someone something about their life that you admire without making it feel like a eulogy. Try a simple, “Just know I’m on your team.” Or say, “Oh friend, that sounds so hard.” Let them talk. Life is hard and pretending it’s not is exhausting. “Can I give you a hug?” Many, not all, people who are suffering are isolated and a kind and tender touch, with consent, is most welcome. And finally... silence. The truth is that no one knows what to say in these sorts of times... feel free to show up and stay quiet. (Pg. 169–174)

Our lives have meaning. God is with us, God is for us, and we are the conduits of God’s love and compassion.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN

## **Sources**

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

\*\*\*Everything Happens is the name of Kate Bowler’s podcast, found on the major podcast channels.