February 11, 2018   
Romans 8:22-28

Actually, that's not in the Bible: “Everything happens for a reason.”

Rev. Kerry Smith   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Romans 8:22-28 The Inclusive Bible

We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit—we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance. The Spirit, too, comes to help us in our weakness. For we don’t know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words. And God, who knows everything in our hearts, knows perfectly well what the Spirit is saying, because her intercessions for God’s holy people are made according to the mind of God. We know that God makes everything work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to God’s purpose.

Kate Bowler is an assistant professor at Duke Divinity School. This week she published a new book, “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved.” She was diagnosed with incurable stage four cancer at age 35. Her book is about her diagnosis and how Christianity has both failed and saved her. In an interview in Time Magazine, she said it felt like Christianity failed her because of “the stuff people said using the Christian faith to be incredibly trite.”[[1]](#footnote-2) “Everything happens for a reason” is one of those things that we say.

We have this human instinct to want to fix what’s broken. It is an instinct to want to help people stop hurting. It is an instinct to want to understand what is happening so we can control it somehow, so that we don’t have to be afraid. A lot of that instinct is good because it is rooted in love for others. We sincerely want to help; we want to make it better but often that instinct leads us to do or say something that is not only unhelpful but can actually do damage.

Instead of someone trying to explain suffering, Kate Bowler says she would prefer a hug or a compliment that doesn’t feel like a eulogy. She says she would prefer people who don’t want to fix her, but instead delight in her and help her realize that today is a beautiful day and there is something fun to do.[[2]](#footnote-3) When in doubt, silence is the best response. Kate Bowler says, “The truth is that no one knows what to say. It’s awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People’s weird, suffering bodies are awkward.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Kate Bowler says one person wrote to her with his policy, “Show up and shut up”. When in doubt, silence is the best response.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Usually when we hear the words, “Everything happens for a reason,” it is in the context of suffering. Someone is hurting. Something bad has happened and we are trying to help. We say it was meant to be or it was part of the plan or it must have been God’s will. We imply that God has a purpose for bringing about or at least allowing situations in which people suffer. We don’t understand why it had to happen, but there must be a reason. Why would God want millions of Jews to die in the Holocaust? Why would God want children to die in a school shooting?[[5]](#footnote-6)

Does everything happen for a reason? Does God really pick winners and losers in sports or intend car accidents or mass murder or genocide? How much does personal responsibility for our actions play a role? If someone lies, is that part of God’s plan? If someone drinks too much alcohol and they decide to drive home, is that God’s will? If someone is killed because of the drunk driver, did God want that to happen?

We have personal responsibility and we also have the question of God’s responsibility. Is God responsible for every terrible thing that happens in our world? Are murder, earthquakes, war, child abuse and starvation part of God’s plan? If that is true, then I think I will curl into a ball and give up right now because what is the point of it all? If that is true, then we are powerless to change anything.

As Christians we believe in God’s providence and God’s sovereignty. We believe that God oversees what happens on our planet and God has authority over all of creation. Some people see God as a micromanager, intimately involved in every detail of the world’s operation.[[6]](#footnote-7) Some people see God as having a hands-off approach; God created everything and then stepped away to let the world run itself.

Anyone ever heard of predestination? John Calvin lived in the 1500s and predestination was his idea. Predestination means God has predetermined everything that happens. Life unfolds according to a script that God has written before any of us are born. Calvin said that God has predetermined, before we are born, whether we will accept God’s salvation or not.[[7]](#footnote-8) You are either one of the elect or you aren’t, and Calvin said that there wasn’t anything that you could do about it. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, thought the idea of predestination was unjust. Wesley said that God wants everyone to be saved and that God works in us to make it possible for us to respond to God’s love and mercy. Some people will reject God, but it is available and freely offered to all.

I can see how the idea that God is directing everything is very comforting. Our world can feel out of control and it makes me feel safe to think that this is all controlled by the will of God. It is one thing to say that God has command over whether this happens or that happens, and it is another thing to say that God has knowledge about events. The God that I read about in the Bible is not a micromanager, but a loving parent who invites us as God’s children to make our own choices, and they will often be the wrong ones.[[8]](#footnote-9) Last week on twitter a Bill Murray parody account tweeted, “Everything happens for a reason. But, sometimes the reason is that you’re stupid and you make horrible decisions.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

The first story in the Bible is about two people figuring life out. Adam and Eve make their own choices. God doesn’t determine which choice Adam and Eve make. From the very beginning of the Bible we have this idea that part of being human is having to make choices between doing good and following God’s path or turning away from it. God has given us freedom to make choices, for better or for worse. When we do something wrong, that is on us, not God. The creation story tells us that we are the ones who exercise dominion on God’s behalf.[[10]](#footnote-11)

It is so tempting to blame God for the consequences of our actions. When we stay up late, when we don’t get enough sleep, when we snap at our spouse, or our co-workers, or our kids, it would be so easy to blame it on God. God gave us a brain, a heart, a conscience, God’s Spirit, the Scriptures, and the ability to interpret the Scriptures as guides to help us select the right path.[[11]](#footnote-12)

If on one side we have John Calvin’s understanding that God is intricately involved in every single thing that happens in our world, on the other side we have Deism. Deism was popular in 18th century America, particularly among some of our nation’s founders. Deism says that God created all things, and then stepped away. Deism says God is not at work in our world at all. God did not send Jesus to show us the way or to save us from ourselves. God’s Spirit does not dwell within us. God is not involved in our lives in any way. Christianity says that God does work in us and through us. God did send Jesus to save us and deliver us. And God does on some occasions and for reasons we do not fully understand, intervene in the world’s affairs in miraculous ways.[[12]](#footnote-13)

I experience God in my life when I walk around White Rock Lake or sit in quiet and hear my heart beat. I experience God in my life when I talk to my covenant group of four other pastors and we share about our joys and frustrations. God is constantly nudging me, reminding me, calling me to action. I experience God in the wonderful adults who teach my children about Jesus. God is not a micromanager or an absentee landlord, God is in the mysterious middle. Most things happen because of the decisions we make or the laws that govern nature and our interaction with them. God speaks to us in the Scriptures, in church, as we pray, and through other people. God strengthens and walks with us.

We are called to be God’s hands and voice in this world, but it is up to us. In Micah 6:8 we hear these words, “God has already made abundantly clear what ‘good’ is, and what God needs from you: simply do justice, love kindness, and humbly walk with your God” (The Inclusive Bible). But it is our choice.

In our Scripture for today, Paul is writing to the Christian community on his way to Rome for his trial before the emperor. From Romans 8:22-28, “We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit—we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance. The Spirit, too, comes to help us in our weakness. For we don’t know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words. And God, who knows everything in our hearts, knows perfectly well what the Spirit is saying, because her intercessions for God’s holy people are made according to the mind of God. We know that God makes everything work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to God’s purpose.”

Paul doesn’t say that God makes everything happen for a reason, or that whatever happens is part of God’s plan. Paul says that no matter what happens, however bad it may be, God will bring good out of the situation. God doesn’t give children cancer or cause people to commit murder, but God has a way of making good come from tragedy.

God used the tragedies in my own life to show me that God was there and that gift was beautiful and good. When I was 17 my stepdad Porter was in a car accident. When we got to the hospital, he was already in surgery. They said the surgery would take all night and people began to show up at the hospital.  My best friend and all of these people from church.  The waiting room was filled with people there to support and love us. They held my hand, they said they loved me, and that they were there for me. In those people, in their faces and in their presence in the middle of the night, being there and staying up with us as we waited and waited, in those people, God was there.  God was present and not fixing it, but making it bearable.  In the presence of those people, God was supporting and caring for, and loving me.

Kate Bowler, the Duke professor diagnosed with stage four cancer at age 35 has a four-year-old son. She said we think our job as parents is to protect our kids from pain, but our job is to help them see the way through the pain.[[13]](#footnote-14) We can’t protect one another from the pain of the world, but we can show each other that there is truth and beauty in the midst of it. Kate Bowler said that Christianity saved her because it reminded her that in the midst of the crushing brokenness, there is something else there, the undeniable, overwhelming love of God.

Remember we are called to do the work. To call your friend who needs you. To build houses in Juarez. To be silent and hold the broken one’s hand. So everything happens for a reason is NOT in the bible. God is not micromanaging your life. You have free choice to help others and to ease their pain. It is up to you not God’s grand plan. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Our scripture reading this morning is found in Isaiah 43:1-3, and it has a lot to say to us this morning. Hear these words from the book of Isaiah.

**But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2**

**When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.**

The scripture eloquently creates this picture of a God who intimately loves us. God created us and claims us. God is with us no matter what.

In fact, it says that even when you walk through fire…not only is God going to be with you, God won’t allow the flames to consume you.

It’s a double-sided image though. It basically promises that we are all going to go through horrible things in our lives. It doesn’t say if you pass through the waters…or if you go through fire…it says when.

But let’s think about what this scripture doesn’t say. It doesn’t say that God caused the fire and the flood. It simply says because of God, the fires and floods in your life don’t get to win anymore.

Becoming a Christian doesn’t mean you won’t have pain in your life, it’s just that when you are in the midst of pain, you aren’t alone…God is with you…and we hope because we know pain will not win…it doesn’t get the final say anymore.

Romans 8:28 is a verse that states it even more strongly, but often gets confused with everything happens for a reason. It says, **We know that all things work together for good**[**\***](javascript:void(0);) **for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**

Not only is God with you…not only will God prevent that pain from winning…God will actually use it for good in your life.

Paul doesn’t say that some things will work for good…he specifically says that all things…which means even evil things…horrible things…all things will work together for good for those who love God.

But once again…it doesn’t say that God causes all things to happen…so that God can use them for good. It simply says that God will use all things for good.

It may seem like a small distinction, but it’s huge when you are enduring something terrible. God didn’t cause my uncle to die in order to teach me a lesson about the fragility of life. God didn’t break my back so that I could be more empathetic towards people who are in pain or that feel different. God didn’t send the paramilitary to the little village in Colombia I worked in to torture and kill half their people to teach me about evil and love and hope.

Of course not! God is not a monster! Quite the opposite…the God I serve and worship loves us so much that he never left any of us alone. God stands with us in the most painful places…even when we are the reason they are happening in the first place…and he continues working for good…working for healing…bringing beauty from ashes.

The images of devastation coming out of South East Texas have been hard to comprehend this week. I don’t think we yet know just how bad the damage really is…or just how many lives have been lost. Bad news will likely continue coming in for a long time.

Where is God? You can almost see our scripture come to life if you have eyes to see. **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you…For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.**

But not everybody has eyes of faith. There are some who have lost almost everything they own…and they are grieving…they are wondering what they are going to do…they may not be thinking about God at all…or maybe they are really mad at God.

They certainly don’t need to hear anybody say…it’s okay…everything happens for a reason. In fact they don’t need to hear us say anything. What they need is to see us show up to help. They need people that they don’t even know to roll up their sleeves and help. They need people that they will never meet to care enough about them to send money and supplies to help.

They may not recognize the beauty coming from the ashes yet…they may not realize the reason why as Christians we love them…they may never realize that God is right there with them in the middle of their pain…that God is moving through us to help. But some things are true whether you believe them or not.

My prayer is that God will indeed use all things for good…even the destruction of Harvey…as he has promised to do! May God use us to help! May people recognize God working through us! May hearts and lives be forever changed as we journey together through even the most painful parts of life! ………………….By the grace of God, may it be so, Amen.

I want to end with a song by David Crowder, called All I Can Say. I have used it to cry out to God in pain and simultaneously remind myself where God is. But lately it is a way to pray for the victims of Harvey who are surely crying out in pain…and I pray will find God in their midst.

Last hymn is “It is well with my soul”

* Tell the story of the hymn…this is a great example of good theology put into practice…he didn’t blame God for what happened, but he knew God was with him
* In 1873, Chicago lawyer Horatio Spafford sent his wife and four daughters on a European trip, with plans to join them later. His family sailed on the SS Ville du Havre, which was struck by another ship and sank. Mrs. Spafford survived, but the daughters were lost. She cabled her husband from Cardiff, Wales: “Saved alone.” Spaffored sailed to meet his wife and wrote this text near the scene of the tragedy.

Everything doesn’t happen for a reason. God doesn’t send hurricanes to destroy our homes to teach us something. God didn’t make my friend’s ex-husband commit suicide so that she and her kids could learn something. God didn’t cause my friend to have a miscarriage because she and her husband needed a lesson.

But when you say, God won’t give you more than you can handle…it sure does sound to lots of people like God is the one making them go through the hell that they find themselves in.

Maybe a better thing to say would be “God will help you handle all that you have been given.” Maybe that’s really what we mean anyway.

Because then we have the source of the power in the correct place. If everything depends on me…we are all in trouble. If everything depends on God…we are in much better shape.

Many of you know that I have some pretty serious back injuries from my past. It’s way more complicated than this, but when I’m telling the short version of the story, I usually simply say that I broke my back when I was in high school.

I spent almost half of my junior year in high school in a huge back brace. I had to wear tight fitting clothes under the brace to protect my skin…and then I had to wear huge clothes over the brace. Jeans wouldn’t go over it…so I had to wear sweat pants every day to high school. You can imagine I was like a dating magnet. It did wonders for my self-esteem.

People who knew I was hurt were scared to hurt me worse, so nobody wanted to touch me. At that time in my life, a huge part of my identity was wrapped up in being an athlete. But I went from playing on the basketball team to being their manager.

I obviously wasn’t able to work out with the team…so I went from being in the best shape of my life to a sudden sedentary lifestyle…and I’m sure you can imagine some of many consequences that had on my weight…on my energy level…and overall health.

At that point in my young life, it was certainly the weakest I had ever felt. It was certainly more than I could handle. But you know what…in II Corinthians 12:9-10 it says, **‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power**[**\***](javascript:void(0);) **is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.**

It’s the opposite of what the world believes, but it’s the truth. In the midst of my powerlessness, I found my true power. God took a horrible situation in my life that he didn’t cause and used it for good.

I learned a lesson that most adults I know haven’t learned yet. I learned that I wasn’t an athlete. Basketball is something I did, but it wasn’t who I am. I am God’s beloved daughter, and that can’t be taken away.

Once I had had time to grieve and adjust and learn to live into my new temporary normal. God brought me to this place where I was again confident about who I was even in the midst of my massive weaknesses. I had become confident about who I am in God! My confidence really had everything to do with who God is and what God is capable of. When my back brace left me…that truth never did.

Things are going to happen to you that you can’t handle. God is going to call you to do amazing things that you won’t be able to handle. But never fear, because our God is an awesome God, and God will help you handle everything that you will ever be given. By the grace of God, may it be so, Amen.

**A COVENANT PRAYER IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION #607** (UMH)

**I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**

Tragedy is part of the human experience and I give thanks that God walks with us through tragedy. In Jesus, God has already walked through our shared human experience with us. Jesus’ resurrection proclaims that evil, hate, pain, and death will not have the final word in our lives.

We live in a world of cause and effect. Actions create consequences. Our own choices produce results. Last week on twitter a Bill Murray parody account tweeted, “Everything happens for a reason. But, sometimes the reason is that you’re stupid and you make horrible decisions.”[[14]](#footnote-15)

Horrible things will happen in our lives, that is part of life. And horrible things will never have the final word. Jesus’ resurrection shows us death is not the end, God’s love has the final word. Suffering is a part of life, and we may learn from suffering but it is not given to teach us. It is not given to punish us, but sometimes it is the consequence of our sin or poor judgment. Through suffering our faith may be strengthened but it is not given because our faith is weak. Suffering can either destroy us or it can add meaning to our life.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Throughout the Bible we see story after story of people not doing what God wants them to do, and God working to comfort, heal, and redeem humanity. God carries us through our suffering and brings good from it. Tragedy isn’t a part of God’s plan, but God gave us free will and bad things will sometimes happen. God doesn’t promise us a pain-free life, but God will be with us to love us, comfort us, and guide us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://time.com/5118044/kate-bowler-interview-cancer-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://time.com/5118044/kate-bowler-interview-cancer-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/08/583774624/what-not-to-say-to-the-terminally-ill-everything-happens-for-a-reason [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/08/583774624/what-not-to-say-to-the-terminally-ill-everything-happens-for-a-reason [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. https://twitter.com/BiIIMurray/status/958884233698783232 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. http://time.com/5118044/kate-bowler-interview-cancer-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. https://twitter.com/BiIIMurray/status/958884233698783232 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Rev. Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths*. Page 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)