

All Things and Nothing – Everything Belongs

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Texts: Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39

Three years ago this month, I preached at the funeral of one of my best friends after his unexpected death. I opened the sermon with a quote from Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner: “Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid.”

Life is hard. Life is dangerous. Being a Christian doesn’t make us safe. Bad things happen to all people. Horrific things happen to some people. People we love will die. Things we cherish will change.

Life is precious. Life is good. Life can be indescribably, exquisitely beautiful. But yes, life is hard.

Things will happen that are unfair. People are cruel. There many things that make us wonder if life is good, many things that leave us doubting God’s presence and love. “What shall we say about these things?” Paul asks... and then he offers a list of things: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, the sword?

Hardship—these are the things that make us say, “Life is hard.” When we are struggling with one thing or another – each of us has our own hardship: loneliness, mental illness, the suffering of a loved one, conflict in an important relationship, grief. Everyone has something, sometime. Life is hard. When you’re struggling to pay the bills, life is hard. When you’re no longer arguing... because you’re no longer speaking, life is hard. When you think, “Oh I can’t wait to tell them...” and then remember that they are gone, forever, life is hard. When the meds aren’t working and the effort to keep on going seems like too much, life is hard. When every day at school is another opportunity for teasing, for trying to keep back tears, for being reminded how much you don’t fit in, life is hard. What can we say about these things, indeed?

Distress—much of what is distressing is hardship, but the stress of it adds another layer of difficulty. Not only is life hard, but it threatens to be overwhelming. When you wake up short of breath from the worry that doesn’t even stop when you’re sleeping. When you don’t know whether it’s a panic attack or a heart attack and fear that either one might do you in. When life is, as Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, “...not so much one damn thing after another as the same damn thing over and over.” When you can’t quit because you need the money, but you’re not sure you can keep going back to the job that might just kill you with the stress of it. When you’ve been defrauded and are so ashamed that you don’t want to pursue it. Distress is an extra layer added to hardship.

Persecution—it’s real, and getting worse. People are persecuted in our own community because of their race. A local church brought in an islamophobic speaker this weekend to spread fear about the non-existent threat of *sharia*. Muslims have come under attack all over the country in the years since 9/11. There are countries where Christians are still persecuted. Jews have been

persecuted for centuries. And we know that our gay, lesbian, and transgendered brothers and sisters may experience persecution. Persecution is real, and it is on the increase in this country. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference recorded over 1300 hate crimes in November, December, and January – over 800 of these were in the week following the election. Among these crimes were almost 60 acts of violence against Jewish Community Centers in 24 states during January.

Famine and nakedness are often associated with poverty, which brings hardship, distress, sometimes persecution too, as altogether too many people in the world believe that people who are poor must have done something wrong and deserve the hardship of poverty.

Paul's list rounds out with "peril and the sword"—danger and violence, and again, way too many people in the world are living with these things on a continuing basis. So many of us in the United States, at least those of us who are white, middle class, straight, and cis-gendered (that is, who identify with the gender of our biological sex), have grown accustomed to safety and security and think of it as normal. But people in many different circumstances, and at many other times in history, including Biblical times, knew danger and violence to be a normal part of life. When we read Paul's list of the things that make life hard, we should remember that although most of us here aren't routinely exposed to persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword, people all over the world are. And yes, there are places in our country, and people in our country for whom danger is an ongoing reality. And as we hear about growing nuclear threats from North Korea, some of us are feeling less safe than we used to.

So, what about these things? Paul says in verse 28 that all things work together for good with those who love God – this verse has caused pain to many people, who wonder whether it means that God plans bad things to happen for some divine purpose.

No. No. No. God does not engineer bad things to happen. God does not create suffering. Bad things happen for all kinds of reasons: the world as it is created is a world where actions have consequences—and God does not typically protect us from the consequences of our actions. We don't have special protection. And while we might wish God would, God doesn't typically intervene to protect us from the actions of other people either. That's our job – to care for one another, to protect one another. Bad things happen – some through our own fault, some through circumstances we could have avoided, some through the choices of others, or circumstances that we couldn't avoid. Bad things happen. Life is hard.

You could ask Jacob about that. His life to this point certainly shows that life is hard, life is precious, and life can be beautiful. Most of his hardships were brought about through his own actions—he cheated his brother of the inheritance his brother was due as the eldest son, and so he had to run for his life, leaving his parents as well. But in today's episode of the saga of Jacob, we see him experience some of the goodness of life as well—he meets and falls in love with Rachel, he is welcomed into his uncle's home, he gets married and whoops...now he's on the other side of the sneaky tricks, and ironically, the trick played on him also has to do with birth order. And in a part of the story we won't be reading, Jacob will eventually play some sneaky tricks on this uncle, now his father-in-law, too.

So, if the bad things that happen to us aren't part of some divine plan, what does Paul mean when he writes that "all things work for good for those who love God"? Life is hard, and if we were to believe that God is intending harm for us, that would make life even harder. I have always understood this verse to indicate how God is available to us to help us make meaning of things after they occur, not to suggest that God is directing events before they occur. Through prayer, reflection, the presence of God and the company of God's people, sometimes you can draw some good out of bad events. In other words, God doesn't bring you lemons, but if you have lemons, God can help you make lemonade. This doesn't mean that these were secretly good events, but sometimes there can be meaning or some good drawn out of events that are not good.

Jacob could tell us about how bad things worked for good in his life, because it was as a result of running for his life and leaving his family that he met the women who would become his wives. There was a cost to his bad choices, and the good that came didn't eliminate that cost, but there were good outcomes as well.

How can meaning or good come in our lives from the bad things that happen to us? One example of this kind of meaning is the person who is able after hard experiences to offer significant support to others in the same circumstances. Or the person who develops a new depth of compassion after hardship. Or a person develops new understanding of their own capacities, or a new awareness of God's presence. Meaning comes in many ways, and it is certainly one of the gifts that can come through our faith in God. Life is hard, but it is rich, and there can be goodness and even beauty that comes to us through the hard times. Everything that happens, good or bad, is part of the wholeness of our lives and contributes to who we become. When it seems like life is just one load of manure after another, plant roses, and wait for the beauty. Everything belongs.

Paul tells us that all things can work for good. So that's all things. What about nothing? What Paul tells us about nothing is that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and this is certainly something that Jacob could testify to as well. Last week we heard the story of his vision of the ladder of angels as he ran for his life after cheating his brother—he had created conflict in his family and defrauded his own brother, yet God was still present to him, caring for him. We will hear more about his experiences of God's presence next week.

God doesn't stop loving us because of our bad choices. The bad things that happen in our lives are not an indication of God's absence. God doesn't bail on us. God doesn't abandon us. Even when we feel alone—and even Jesus felt alone, on the cross—nothing can separate us from God's love.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing can separate us from the love of God: not life, not death, not angels, not rulers, not things present, not things to come, not powers, not things we have done, not things we have failed to do, not what others think of us, not what we might think of ourselves, not anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Life is hard, yes. But God's love is with us always. God never leaves us, nor leaves us alone. These verses are often used at funerals—I read them at most funerals. But these verses are not just about death; they are about the many hard things, losses, and changes that come in every life.

Yes, beautiful and terrible things will happen. Life is hard. But the good news is that we are never alone—nothing can separate us from the love of God. Don't be afraid. Amen.