



Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith

Why Do Bad Things Happen?



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

August 13, 2017
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-08-13-AAA.mp3>.

Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith
Why Do Bad Things Happen?

The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell
Grace Episcopal Church
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
August 13, 2017

On our first reading from Genesis we hear about a man named Joseph. Joseph's own brothers, filled with jealousy at his favored status, hated him. The brothers' envy and hatred drove them to kidnap Joseph. But they didn't stop there. The brothers conspired to kill him... but settled instead to profit off of him, stripping him of his robe, scoffing his dreams, throwing him in a pit, and then selling him as a slave. This is a story of estrangement. It's a story of physical and emotional harm. And it's a story about the consequences of rash acts. But above all, it's a story in which bad things happen.

Unfortunately, it's not an isolated incident. Stories of family strife are prominent throughout scripture. It begins with the murder of Abel by his older brother, Cain, and continues with the stories of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah. In each case, one person is shown favor by an authority figure but that favor leads to great hardship for the individual. Great hardship, strife, suffering, estrangement, and brokenness – these are things that humanity has struggled with and through since the beginning of time. And we continue to struggle with these things today.

Not only do we struggle with these things at an individual level, but fractured relationships and brokenness are a very real part of our experience as human beings at all levels – familial, communal, and national strife are part of our shared experience. We need look no further than the stories coming out of Charlottesville, VA this weekend where protesters and counter-protesters descended on the city over escalating tension around the removal of a Confederate Civil War statue and what it represents. Hate, bigotry, and bias are on the national stage. For me, this moment feels especially tense because it taps into larger issues of race, politics, violence, culture, media, and religion that permeate our society. It is a reminder that as a nation, we are polarized. Like Joseph and his family, we are estranged from one another. We are divided. We live in a constant state of stress and fear – fear of strangers, fear of neighbors, fear of self, fear of death, fear of loss, fear of bad things happening. And why? Why is this the state of affairs? Why do these bad things happen?

In short, because this world is not perfect. In the beginning of the Book of Genesis we hear an account of the world's creation. In the account, God creates everything that is – land, water, light, creatures, vegetation, humanity in God's own image – everything. God pronounces the results of each day of creation as "good" and the whole creation in the end as "very good". I preached on the inherent goodness of creation at the beginning of the summer. And while it's true that God created, and deemed creation good, even very good, creation is not perfect.

But, I don't have to tell you that. You know it. You experience it. We live in a reality of brokenness, a world of fractures, in which bad things happen because life isn't perfect. We are not perfect. Sometimes bad things happen because of us, because of our actions, our decisions. After all, we are free creatures. Biblical scholar and author Verna Dozier says, "to be created in the image of God has nothing to do with looking like God. It has to do with God's freedom.... Human beings were not created perfect and programmed. Human beings were created free" (The Dream of God). To be created in the image and likeness of God means that we are endowed with a radical, even fearsome, freedom. To a certain extent, we are free to make our own choices, our own decisions. We are in control of our actions and our inactions. We are free to respond as God wants us to, or to go another way. God desires us to choose a way of connection – a way of right relationship with others and with God. But we don't always measure up.

For example, let's look again at the story of Joseph from our first reading. Jacob's overt favoritism of Joseph caused his other children to feel alienated. The brothers look at each other through the eyes of hurt and anger. Joseph doesn't realize that his youthful boasting is one of the reasons that led to his brothers' contempt. The brothers' decision to punish Joseph led to enslavement. In this story, all decisions led to estrangement and brokenness. Did their responses mirror what God desired for them? No.

We can sometimes be our own worst enemy in our imperfection, bringing bad things upon ourselves. And other times, bad things happen that are beyond our control – things that have no correlation to our choices. In either case, it is crucial to realize that bad things don't happen as a punishment from God. God isn't sitting on a heavenly throne with a set of scales on his lap doling out retaliation for sins. It's not tit-for-tat. God's justice doesn't work like that. Sometimes bad things happen just because bad things happen.

I don't believe God wills bad things to happen but God does allow them to happen. It's part of that whole freedom thing. God isn't a puppet master, controlling the world's marionette strings. God created the world and released us to our own devices. That being said, release doesn't mean abandon. God has never and will never abandon us. God is with us in our highs and lows. God is with us in the good and the bad times. God became one of us to share with us in the struggles and the joys of life and to empower us to live our lives in right relationship with God and with our neighbors.

Jesus exemplifies God's presence throughout all of life's circumstances in our Gospel reading today. Danger and fear permeate this narrative. The disciples were out in a boat and before long the boat was battered by waves. The Greek word used here literally means torture, torment or harassment; figuratively it means severe distress. This was a scary situation for the disciples; in fact it could have been a life or death kind of situation. They were in the midst of a bad thing that they had no control over. Suddenly, Jesus was there, defying density, gravity, and belief as he walked on water to the storm-strewn ship. And the first thing he said to the disciples, was "take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Jesus met the disciples in the middle of this traumatic experience and gave them courage. And when Peter stumbled in his attempt to walk to Jesus on the water, Jesus immediately reaches out to grab him and save him.

This same God is with us in our times of fear. When bad things happen, as they will, we do not face them alone. We may not have the 1st century man of Nazareth physically with us to calm our storms, but nevertheless God is with us in our bad times, even in our worst times – especially then – standing with us against all odds, to calm us, to love us, and to give us strength for the journey.

Bad things happen because the world is not perfect. Bad things happen because we are broken. And sometimes, bad things happen just because they happen. But in the midst of these things God is with us. God who entered our reality in the person of Jesus, whose suffering and death shows us the extent of God's solidarity with us, that God, is with us always. We are never alone. Amen.