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The Message: Clichés II: It's All Part of God's Plan

Everything Happens for a Reason; It's All Part of God's Plan; It's God's Will  
We use some form of this cliché when bad things happen and we want to help.

These sayings can rub salt in an open wound. It's as if we're saying that even the most terrible events were "meant to be." "We seek to comfort, and others seek to comfort us, by saying that God has a particular purpose for bringing about (or allowing) situations in which people suffer."

Calvin

The theologian Jean Calvin believed that God, the highest authority in the universe, causes everything - Including the weather, which was in prescientific times seen as punishment or reward from God.

According to Calvin, God has predetermined whether we will accept salvation or be damned. No free choice. No doubt, no questioning. Comforting if you believe you are one of the elect.

Denies Personal Responsibility

That allows us to blame God. 'Everything is God's fault.'

- God meant for my team to win/lose
- God made me forget your birthday.

Wesley

John Wesley on the other hand, believed that God wills all humanity to be saved and works in us to make it possible for us to respond to God's love and mercy. Some choose to accept, others reject, but salvation is available to all.

The scriptural reasoning behind this group of cliches is often derived from Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

But Paul is not saying that everything happens for a reason. Rather, Paul says that God will take even the most meaningless suffering and use it to accomplish some kind of good in the lives of those who love God.

The danger in believing it's all in God's plan make us think 'We are powerless to change things.'

- 'There is no reason ever to wear a seat belt; if you are meant to die in a car accident, you will.
- It won't matter how much you exercise, or whether you eat bacon three times a day If it's your time ....'

Christians believe in the power of God, but we interpret that power in different ways:

- God as micromanager planning parking spots for us or
- God as absentee landlord, who created then stepped away to let the world run itself.

But the overall theme of the Bible is that God is more like a parent who invites us to make our own choices, even knowing we will sometimes make the wrong ones.

God gave us a brain, a heart, a conscience, Spirit, the scriptures, wise teachers, the ability to interpret the scriptures as guides to help us select the right path. We have what we need to bear personal responsibility.

The Bible is largely the story of people doing what God doesn't want. God works to comfort, to heal, to challenge and redeem, carrying us through suffering and bringing something good.

Jesus teaches that God does seek to influence us; God works in us and through us. God sent Jesus to save and deliver us. And sometimes, mysteriously, God intervenes in the world.

The story that we heard Nancy read today -- this vision of Jesus being surrounded by prophets of old - transformed in a moment. This is a spiritual reality that undergirds our faith -- it's so much more than evidence of a controlling God.

It's a turning point in Luke's gospel in a few short verses Jesus will "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51) and begin his journey to the cross.

This identifies what Jesus' mission is and how it is going to end.

But it's also a critical moment for the disciples, drawn into the presence of Moses and Elijah, experiencing a glimpse of God's presence, and being nudged to follow this one, the chosen, to the end.

This might just be a glimpse of what heaven is like -- a picture of glory -- time breaks open for a moment when you see Jesus for who he really is. God's future breaks into the present for the disciples.

Mystical experience has been part of our faith from the beginning. And whether it's the three disciples experiencing this vision of Jesus -- or John Wesley's conversion experience that he described as being 'strangely warmed,' -- there is no way we understand how God works in the world. It's a mystery.

We know God is present, but God won't fit into our categories of human control.

But we do have hints that God is nudging those of us who wait in prayer to be nudged.

Alan got an Apple watch from our youngest for Christmas a year ago, and every so often it pinged to tell him to walk, to breathe. That's how God nudges us -- the watch didn't force him to get up and walk in the middle of dinner, but it did remind him to be active. He didn't really want to be reminded to walk while he was eating dinner, it turns out. So when it fell (or was it pushed?) and broke, he had his daughter replace it with a nice old fashioned analog watch.

I think that happens with us in our faith journey too. We don't want to be reminded too often that we need God's help.

I had a Chicana sister in law for a while. Her mother went to mass every day of her life. I wonder what that would be like for Protestants: attending church every day. It's never been a tradition, because we Protestants have a greater emphasis on the Word -- and hearing a sermon everyday, well it would be too painful a reminder that we have a responsible part to play in the Christian life. Even weekly is hard for a lot of people.

But there is Good News!

Between the imaginary micromanager and the absentee landlord is the God who gives us freedom and allows us to take risks, who doesn't cause tragedy but uses it, who works indirectly through people - nudging us toward love in small ways and sometimes in mysterious ways as in the transfiguration of Jesus. And through Jesus' death and resurrection God gives us the hope of forgiveness and reunion with Christ and our loved ones in heaven.

Paul promises that, no matter what happens, God will somehow bring good out of it for those who love God.

Horrible things happen, but they don't have the last word. They become part of our journey that finally reaches its end in God's kingdom. Death isn't the final work. Love outlasts it all.

And God does find a way to work good in us no matter what. Yesterday at our region's first meeting, we heard a sermon in which our chair quoted Joshua 1.9: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'

Now, what can you say instead of It's all in God's plan? And remember, you can find these in the printed sermon in the Narthex or online.

God doesn't want this for you.

God suffers with you.

God weeps for you.

I hope you experience God's love in those around you.

I'm praying for you for -- (whatever the person seems to need) -- strength, endurance, healing, hope.

I pray that God brings you moments of peace.

I'm sorry.

I love you.