

**“All Things for the Good”**

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

I want to express my appreciation for the opportunity to be in the pulpit again. It is a joy to be here. I remember talking with Scott when we were working through what my job would be, and I asked if I could preach once a month, and he said, “Yes, that would be terrific. I appreciate the break and pace of preaching every week.” I remember that. I remember preaching every week, and I will tell you I have a great deal of empathy and respect for the challenge of developing sermons every week. I, in contrast, am in the opposite position. I have not preached weekly for 10 years, and so you all are the bearers of that. I have lots of words inside of me, [laughter] so I will make every effort to constrain my sermon today to within the worship hour, but I will confess there was a version of this sermon that was 40 minutes long. [Laughter.]

My focus today (I will look at several verses in this text), but my focus in particular is on Romans 8:28, a popular verse and a beautiful promise: “We know all things will work for the good of those who love God. Who are called according to his purpose.”

I don’t know in your own lives how you have encountered this promise, or this passage used to share from one to another; but I will share that I have encountered it negatively. I have encountered people sharing it in a way that I don’t think is faithful to the passage, to what it is actually saying, or how it could be interpreted correctly. I have been with folks in their time of loss, when they were struggling with the passing of a loved one, or dealing with a tragedy in their life and someone had come up to them and shared with them, “We know that this is part of God’s plan or, God must have had a reason for letting this happen.”

I would say two things: (One,) I would say this is not what this passage says, and [Two] also I would say I don’t believe this is what the whole testimony of Scripture says about who God is, and how God relates to us.

I had the opportunity to share with a friend of mine who is actually writing on this topic, right now. He is a fellow seminary graduate who is exploring the question of loss and providence - or the will of God - and he is uniquely qualified.

A little over a year ago, I got a call from our mutual friend, Tyler. Tyler called me and said, “Bill, I have some terrible news. Our friend Tim’s young wife, who had just recently announced that she was pregnant with their first child, died suddenly in the morning.”

I told my wife and she just said, “Go.” The next day I was out in California, sharing with Tim, in the midst of his life-rent-into [pieces]. Everything he was looking forward to; the glory of living out this beautiful marriage they shared together, and fatherhood, and life going forward, had suddenly been taken away from him. It was as if his entire soul had been rent asunder.

I was talking to him a year out, as he was processing this and considering with me what it meant to consider the promise of Romans 8:28, in the midst of such loss. We talked about that trite - somewhat broken – attempt at consolation that people might share: God must

have had a reason for this - and that rings more than hollow. It is not just hollow to share it with someone who has suffered such a senseless loss: "God must have had a reason for this, or this is all a part of God's plan." It is an indictment of God. It is saying something about that is not at all keeping with a good and loving God.

I am familiar with a similar tragedy that this congregation underwent. I was not here then. In fact, I was a young child. But I have been told by members of this congregation about a pastor who served this church from 1973-1977. Doyle Hanson, who died in a tragic accident in a boating event in Minnesota, where it is believed - as it was explained to me - that his daughter fell out of the boat and he attempted to save her, and they both drowned. I am trying to imagine what comfort there could be to turn to a congregation in the midst of that kind of shock and loss, and say, "Clearly this was God's will. It was God's desire that this happen."

As I said, in talking to Tim - and his words - there is an indictment of God. In that, the God who allows that to happen, the God who causes that to happen - how can that God be good?

This is wrapped up in a large conversation and debate that has been happening for millennia. It has a number of names. One name is the Theodicy Problem, another is the Problem of Evil. In our last century it was described as the Problem of Pain, and it goes like this: There are three things that are very difficult to hold together, intentionally: One is the existence of suffering and evil - and we have seen in these few examples I have described today that we experience senseless loss; the second is a God who is all-powerful and capable of stopping any evil; and the third, is a God who is good and loving. The question is simply: If there is a God, and God is loving and good, and God is capable of stopping suffering, then why is there suffering? How do we understand this? How do we reconcile these three things?

There are a number of answers to this challenge, but the one that resonates with me comes from a popular author of the last century - C.S. Lewis. He described this as something that flowed out of the character of God. He affirmed that God is fully capable of stopping any suffering; that God is indeed good and loving; but, that God chose to create a world with people. That God chose to create humanity with agency, with the ability to make decisions, out of God's loving character, out of this relational God-relating-for-eternity-between-the-Father-Son-and-Holy Spirit, in this dance of love. In the outflow of that, God created people who would be capable of responding in love and worship. In order to do that, he had to create people who were capable of choosing to follow or not, or were capable of choosing to worship and to live and to do the great moral good of God's Kingdom - or the terrible evil, that we can find in the depths of the human heart.

Now I don't have the opportunity to dwell deeply on this, but I share with you that that is my understanding of how it is that God is good and powerful, and yet there is evil. It is because God set aside part of his power for the purpose of allowing people to make choices.

There is an even more difficult realm of this: I was sitting in Australia on vacation in a coffee shop with my brother-in-law who has a PhD in theology from Edinburgh. We were in a beautiful beach town, and so Bret and I sat in a coffee shop and discussed the problem of evil, as one does [laughter] - and our wives, I think, shook their heads. He [Bret] has a specialization in theology. His study was in the theology of creation, and he challenged me

on this: He said, “Bill, you should understand that creation as well has agency - that God doesn’t use all of creation like this puppet - like this thing that he is constantly controlling - but God allows creation, as well, to continue and work.”

We see that. We see the outflow of that and we may wish that God would rein in the agency of nature, particularly recently as we suffer earthquakes, floods and hurricanes. So, there is evil because God created this space for agency outside of ourselves.

You might ask: “Bill, if you believe this, then aren’t you just describing the clockmaker God, of the deists of Thomas Jefferson and others in the Enlightenment, who believed that God created a beautiful system and then just set it to run, and sat back and watched.” I don’t believe that is the case; nor do I believe that is faithful to the witness of Scripture, and particularly not to this passage.

This passage paints a picture of a God who is describing the agency of creation as groaning and waiting and, also, the agency of human beings who are yearning to be perfected - and God had worked in the midst of that. No, this passage describes something very different than a clockmaker God, but a God who is very much involved in our lives and our world, and brings our individual stories together in a grander story that begins with the beginning of time and ends in the culmination of God’s final coming.

Now, in my own life I have moments that I might describe as “guardian angel moments.” Maybe you can think of some for yourself. There were two that came into mind for me. Moments when I looked back and I couldn’t guarantee that this was God’s providential action, but there were moments when I brushed up against an alternate timeline - where I can see how my life might have been different. One, when I was 16 years old. My parents, in their wisdom, bought me a 1973 Camaro, when I was 16 years old. [Laughter.] I loved that car.

I was driving home in Bakersfield, Calif., and I was going up an on-ramp that I had gone up many times before - a clover leaf on-ramp - and I might have been going a little fast, and I was driving in the rain. I will offer this caveat: In Bakersfield, we don’t get rain like we do here in Iowa. It rained 6 inches a year in Bakersfield. (We might get 6 inches a weekend, here in Des Moines.) So, for a new driver like me, rain was a new experience.

I didn’t yet understand that as you were going in a corner, you didn’t hear that little squeal of the wheels before they broke; they just went into a full four-wheel slide. So, I was in a full four-wheel slide heading onto a freeway, and I could see the oncoming cars in this collision course with my driver door. I imagined myself jumping that curb between me and the freeway. But, for whatever reason, I turned away from it a little bit. My front tire hit the curb and didn’t jump it, and then slapped my rear wheel into the curb. It shot off three lug nuts, that I assumed were imbedded in the fender of the car that was about to hit me.

Long story short, I was saved. I did not experience the timeline that appeared to be right before my eyes.

The second story of this “providence of God moment” in our life was the story of my oldest son’s birth. Asher, who read the Old Testament Scripture today. When Tracy was at delivery, and we were going to have Asher’s delivery, they put on the fetal heart monitor.

They were monitoring his progress as she had contractions and they looked concerned. They described to me, the non-medical person in the room, that there was something called “D cells,” [showing on the monitor] that at each contraction Asher’s heart rate was slowing. The OBGYN looked very concerned. Within minutes we were in an operating room and they were doing an emergency C-section and bringing him out.

I admit it is difficult for me to remember this experience without tears, but what we found after he was born was that he had a true knot in his umbilical cord. During the contractions they were pressing on that knot and they were shutting off his [Asher’s] blood supply. Were he to be born naturally, he could have gone 10-20 minutes without any blood supply and [this] could very likely have killed him.

So, this was another [providence of God] moment. We were surrounded by a fantastic group of doctors in an enormous medical center. We were not at risk but if it were another time, or if we were not in that place where we had ready access to an operating room; I saw the opportunity for my eldest son to be taken from me.

Maybe you, as well, have these moments of recognizing when God has spared you from loss; but there are all of these other opportunities we have no idea. I have no idea how many other times God intervened in my life. What else was I spared from? I have no way of knowing. I don’t know how God has acted. It is a complete mystery to us. So, when we encounter loss, when we ask the question, “God, why did you let Doyle Hanson and his daughter die in such a senseless way? Certainly, you could have stopped that. Why didn’t you stop that? You could have saved Tim’s wife and their unborn child, why in this instance did you not intervene?”

You know, I reflect on the book of Job in this: Job was in a similar situation where he asked these questions, “Why did you let this happen to me?” He was given an audience with God - an opportunity to come and speak and give him his case - but God didn’t tell him why. Instead God said something very different. God said, “Job, you have no idea. Were you there at the beginning of time when I laid the footstools of the mountains? Were you there when I bounded the sea? Do you understand that I exist at the end of time, at the beginning of time, outside of time, and I can see all of this? You have no understanding of this yet.”

I was walking the dog with my son, Miles, the other day and he was discussing time travel. He was fascinated by this, telling me he is convinced that if we were to develop time travel, that as we pass through all of these alternate timelines to get where we are going, we would destroy them because we would be inserting these breaks in physics, so there would be all of these rippling cascades of effects.

There is something very similar to this. If we were to begin in pulling the strings of time, if you and I were to make one small change here in our lives in this day, what are the ends of the causation of that rippling effect? Where does it reach to? We have no idea. Our ability to discern the consequence of an intervention are beyond our capacity. And if we begin to imagine God interacting in all of the individuals’ lives all across our world, all throughout time, the effects of any particular change from now all the way to the end of eternity is beyond our comprehension. But God comprehends it all. God is capable of seeing all of the possibilities. We are not in a place where we can understand. There is hope that one day we

will be - when we come to Heaven - that we will understand. We will see clearly what we only now see dimly.

C.S. Lewis hoped, [how] he described it was, that he would get to Heaven and he would say, "Of course, that is how it was all meant to be."

After preaching at least a sermon's length of stuff and another section to go, I might ask the question: What is the hope of Romans 8:28, in the midst of this difficulty, of when is God acting and how is God acting and what does it mean in our lives? Where is the hope of Romans 8:28? It's not that God will always act to save us from suffering. It is that God will work all things together for our good - whatever it is - the good, the bad, the loss. God will knit all of these things together for the good in our own story, and in the greater story of God's creation that God is weaving us into. Stated in the negative is the opposite: There is nothing so awful that we can go through, nothing so depraved, nothing so terrible or evil that it stops God's ability to do good. Whatever the situation, God can work good through it. God can redeem all evil. Not that God takes away the sting of death, but even death cannot stop God's ability to work - even [in] that, the darkest moment - for good.

My friend, Tim, shared this: He said it was like Joseph in the pit. What promise could you offer Joseph who had been tossed into the pit by his brothers and left for dead? What could you share with him that he would find to be good news? It is this promise that God is with us. Even when we are in the pit, [that] doesn't stop God from being capable of working in our lives, mending all things together for our good.

Let us pray: Almighty God, the depths of your knowledge and ability are beyond our understanding. When we encounter loss and suffering and senseless tragedy, even in the midst of joys and hopes and dreams, Lord, we have no means of assessing and understanding. They are beyond our comprehension. God, we ask that you would grant us peace to trust in you, like the Israelites in the desert could trust, that you will provide. That we could trust that, no matter the difficulty we face, you will weave all these things together for our good and for the good of your Kingdom. We offer this in Jesus' name. Amen.