

“Making Friends with Our Luck”

October 8, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Text: *“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

(Romans 8:28, 38-39, NRSV)



Image Credits: Top, the iconic entrance to Las Vegas;
Bottom, mourners holding candles at Memorial service for the fallen of October 1, 2017 (from Robyn Beck/AFP – Getty Images)

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

I preached this sermon twenty-three years ago in the wake of a disaster that affected so many people in our region: the crash of USAir Flight 427 in Hopewell Township and the loss of innocent lives.

It was a difficult time and many people were asking why.

This has been a difficult week for all of us. The pure evil unleashed in rapid arms fire still rings in the hearts of all who share in the grief and sadness of the worst mass shooting in U. S. history in Las Vegas last Sunday night. Innocent lives were caught up in the inexplicable and we catch ourselves asking why. . .

Closer to home, a young upper classman, a good friend, and fraternity brother crashes his vehicle in a single car accident Saturday night and his family, friends, brothers and Robert Morris University mourns his tragic loss. People ask why . . .

Not several days later, and a car going uphill on University Boulevard, directly across from the RMU campus, crashes into another car turning left into a shopping plaza; an 84 year-old man and his 55 year-old son are killed, the other driver, a woman, is critically hurt. Things happen . . .

A person going in for a check-up on the small malignancy discovered a few months ago receives a new diagnosis that hits like hammer-blows in the words "stage four" . . . *What? Why?*

The theological convention goes like this:

God is all powerful.

God is all good.

Terrible things happen.

We can hold on to any two of these propositions quite easily, but it is a unique problem of theology to hold all three at the same time. . . The problem of evil is perhaps the most difficult issue people of faith must face: we trust in a loving, all powerful God, but then tragedy strikes, hardships come, accidents happen . . . And the neat little systems we have worked out to describe our world; how it works; and our place in it come to a screeching halt and everywhere we look there seems to be a question mark hovering or lurking nearby. In the face of cancer metastasizing, or in cars crashing, or in deadly bullets flying, faithful people ask why?

The psalm today asks why? The Psalmist recounts God's goodness to his people in the past, notes how well he took care of them in the midst of enemies and foes, but stands confused in the present time of trouble and wonders that God has changed the rules somehow and instead punishes faithfulness and goodness and righteousness – *"Wake up God! Bad things are happening to good people!"*

Perhaps you've had some of those thoughts this week, too.

What do we say about a world created by a loving God in which bad things happen to good people? The philosopher Henry James once said, *"It may be more useful to say that we live in a God-created world of chance."* That is to say that God in his goodness and creative genius created the wonder and majesty of the world, with its share of physical laws and structures, but then stepped back from the edge, letting it spin on and on . . . And in the course of Life happening – stuff happens too – that beyond certain physical laws like gravity and light there is the unpredictability of life. Try as we might with accu-track and long-range computer algorithms, we have no better means of forecasting the weather two weeks from now than the Neanderthal-in-deer-hide squinting into the sun did eons ago. . . A sudden puff of wind – unaccounted for in high tech modeling – sends the storm east instead of north.

Are we content to say life, like the weather, is just a matter of luck? Does God have a role? . . . Be careful . . . I cannot accept the mass murder of innocent concert-goers, or the crash of an airplane, or the battering of a hurricane, or an abnormal cat-scan as God's will . . . There were a few people who, when Katrina hit a few years back, said the storm's fury was God's judgment on New Orleans. . . I find it hard to believe that people are "meant" to have accidents. Accidents happen. People get cancer. Planes crash. Storms rage. Pure evil exists, but don't go looking to God as the cause of any of them.

The insurance industry has labeled storms and hurricanes, hail, lightening and tornados as "acts of God". That is, quite simply, one of the greatest cases of defamation of character known. It is to take God's name in vain. God is not some cosmic kill-joy who has nothing better to do than whip up storms

that flood towns, or smash houses, or kill people having a good time . . . God is not enthroned above the foundations of the world like a wizard zapping people in morbid delight . . .

Be careful what you say is due to the will of God. You, too, might be assassinating his character and committing him to unspeakable acts of evil. If God had a purpose for the shootings in Las Vegas, then he had a reason to kill six million Jews, or give some people defective genes which cause their children to die, or be ravaged by disease. . .

Yet, when suffering comes, when tragedy strikes, when the meaningless and senseless come hanging about our lives like mill-stones dragging us under, we are where the psalmist is and we wonder if God has gone to sleep on us, or looked away, if briefly. But the presence of God will not be found in the causes, but in what comes of them. It is not God's will that these things take place – "acts of God" – but we can find God in the midst of them . . . and he is not asleep – he is very much awake! He is there in the anguished silent sobs of grieving loved ones. He stands chilly watch over the killing fields with the police officer and the first responder and those who sort through the rubble. He is with the coroner who must handle the unspeakable and the pastor who reaches into the unknowable with a comforting arm and a prayer in the sorrow.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, himself a man who has known profound personal tragedy, says that in the face of suffering and tragedy, the question we form with our shocked hearts and troubled minds ought not to be *"what did I do, or they do, to deserve this?"* But rather, *"If this is what has happened to me, what do I do now, and who is there to help me?"* Not *"Why did you let this happen, God?"* But *"God, see what is happening to me. Can you help me?"*ⁱ

And what we do with the answer will go a long way to determine whether we will triumph in spirit, or go down to the dust in despair. Henry Van Dyke, a Presbyterian minister-scholar-statesman-sportsman of the late 19th and early 20th CY, would accept, in the main, Henry James' description of a

"God-created world of chance" but pushed his fellow Christians to find God working in it. And in finding God present there, begin "making friends with their luck" – good or bad. As Van Dyke once said,

*"I remember that what we call our fortunes, good or ill, are but the wise dealings and distributions of a Wisdom higher, and a Kindness greater, than our own. And I suppose that their meaning is that we should learn, by all the uncertainties of our life . . . how to be brave and steady and temperate and hopeful, whatever comes, because we believe that behind it all there lies a purpose of good, and over it all there watches a providence of blessing."*ⁱⁱ

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God . . ." Paul's words in Romans, chapter eight, are instructive here for they can be rendered this way: "We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him. . ." All things; in triumph as well as tragedy; through capital improvements as well as cancer diagnoses; in personal aspirations as well as improbable accidents; in spirited struggle as well as spiteful tragedy. For behind our luck, whether good or bad, and lurking among the questions and fears and consternations we face, there is a person who knows us and loves us; who is very interested in how it goes with us and wants us to know he is for us – always for us. And despite what we may feel at the moment, desires us to reach out to him for help and comfort.

Stuff happens in our lives which make us think bad things about ourselves or others or God; which causes us to question not only his goodness, but what may be wrong with us that something like this could happen. And instead of asking the question "where does this tragedy come from", instead we must find the courage to ask, "where does this all lead?" for what you make of what has happened will testify to the life you live and will witness to the world what you really believe.ⁱⁱⁱ Speaking in the knowledge of his own son's tragic death, Rabbi Kushner suggests:

". . . that there is one thing we can still do for those we loved and lost. We could not keep them alive. Perhaps we could not even significantly lessen their pain. But the one crucial thing we can do for them after their death is to let them be witnesses for God and for life, rather than, by our despair and loss of faith, making them 'the devil's martyrs.'"^{iv}

And whether what you face is the meaningless loss of life of people you do not know through tragic evil, or accidents, or in the very personal reality of disease, or pain, before you despair of your circumstances and throw in the towel, try this: make friends with your luck, remembering that as a Christian, the best piece of luck is the presence of Christ Jesus and his love for you and to you – grace you never could earn; with the gift of faith only God can give – a piece of good luck which can never be taken away; and from whom there can be no separation, ever. And by the love he gives you, know deep, deep within you that in all things God works for good.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York: Schocken Books, 1981, pp. 44, 60-61.

ⁱⁱ Rev. Dr. Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman's luck*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1899, p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kushner, pp. 137-138.

^{iv} Ibid.