

September 2, 2018

TEXT: James 1:17–25

TITLE: When Good Things Come From Imperfect People

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Why do bad things happen to good people? That's one question I get asked a lot. There is no easy or definitive answer to this, but here are three partial answers. 1) Sometimes bad things happen because of choices even good people make. Good people smoke. Good people drink. Good people travel to London and look the wrong way when crossing the street. Sometimes those choices lead to bad things. 2) Sometimes bad things happen because of larger choices we make that affect good people. We get into cars even if not everyone obeys all the traffic laws. We breathe air even when our community does things that cause pollution that leads to lung disease. Shops sell handguns; nations engage in wars; and combinations of weapons and armies mean innocent people are put in harms' way and bad things happen. 3) Sometimes bad things happen simply because we are fragile creatures who live in a violent world—a world of earthquakes and tsunamis, a world with rattlesnakes and malaria-carrying mosquitoes, a world in which every living creature eventually dies—including when the bodies of good people break down in seemingly tragic ways.

Yet this question really isn't about why bad things happen to good people. The question is a roundabout way to ask "Why doesn't God intervene on behalf of good people (like me and those I love) to stop bad things?" So what would that look like? That would require a God who stops us from smoking, who makes sure we look the right way when crossing the street, who corrects our bad driving habits—no, keeps us out of cars and planes and wars altogether, a God who eliminates all mosquitoes carrying diseases and tumors that wreak havoc on our bodies. That is asking too much. But what if God did some of those things at least once in a while—especially when it involves those we love or me in particular? Again, there are no easy answers or short sermons about this. But there is one comforting response from God that goes something like this: We exist in a complex, beautiful, and at times risky world and from the beginning of time, it has never been God's plan to take you out of this world or wrap you in a bubble to protect you from this world. Rather God's eternal plan has been to join you in this world—to be beside you even when bad things happen—and to offer you hope, love and peace from your first breath to your last.

Now that I've raised this huge topic, I want to suggest there's another way to think about all this and it too involves a question for which there is no easy or short answer. Ask yourself this: How is it possible for good things to be done by us flawed and imperfect people? Let's be honest. We are not always the brightest bulb in the candelabra. There are days none of us earns our paycheck, none of us would get a star on our report cards, and certainly none of us (including me) should be allowed to drive on the streets of Pittsburgh. We are imperfect people—fallible, temperamental, prone to bad moods and jumping to false conclusions, selfish, quick to blame others, hesitant to do what we know is right. If you don't believe me, there are hours of home movies and YouTube videos that verify how flawed the human race, including us, actually is. The big question

is not so much about why bad things happen, but dear Lord how is it possible that anything good comes from us fallible human beings?

That question can be answered with one word—one important, “churchy” word: Grace. Grace is the name we give to God’s caring intervention and transforming power at work in our lives and the world around us. There’s a concise description of it in Romans 8:26 where it simply says, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.” God’s Holy Spirit doesn’t save us from our weakness; rather it helps us in our weakness. Also, at the end of that same chapter, we’re reminded of the amazing good news, that nothing in all creation can separate us or anyone else from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Grace is God’s help in our weakness—in every expression and experience of our imperfect lives. This relates to another idea that comes from the famous theologian Karl Barth. Barth once said: *The grace of God and the omnipotence of God are identical. We must never understand one without the other.* The grace of God and the all-encompassing power of God are identical. God’s grace and power are omnipresent, ever active in ways that help us in our weakness. Grace doesn’t just happen when we want it or expect it. God doesn’t act gracefully when we’ve done something good, like some contractual reward for doing what’s right. No, grace is infinite, present everywhere, even in the places where our mistakes have led us. Even when we are particularly unlovable and unworthy—grace is there, calling forth light from darkness and life from all that would diminish or harm life. So even when bad things happen, they are never the ultimate reality or the final word because of God’s grace.

Kathleen Norris is a talented Christian writer and speaker who, many years ago, had given a talk at a Lutheran seminary, signed copies of her book and socialized until late in the evening. When she returned to her hotel room, she couldn’t get to sleep. So she grabbed a book and decided to wander back down to the hotel bar, where she ordered a gin gimlet and settled into one of the booths. (Did the minister just say “gin gimlet”?) The book she was reading was Simon Tugwell’s *The Ways of Imperfection*, which appropriately enough is a book about saints. Tugwell insists that it is through our failings and weaknesses, our ways of imperfection, that we find God and God finds us; and in ways both wonderful and mysterious God can turn the messes we make to the good. Grace isn’t like help from a friend—which is not a bad thing, but it won’t ultimately save you. Grace is more than that—deeper, stronger. It intrudes on us, works in spite of us, and is not dependent on our accepting or understanding it. That’s what makes it grace. That’s what makes it saving. That’s what it means to believe God can make good things come forth even from us imperfect people.

Which brings me back to our scripture lesson for today. When I’ve preached on James 1, I’ve usually been drawn to the verse in the middle of the passage—vs. 23 where James says “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers”—hearers who let God’s word go in one ear and out the other, never putting the truth into action. But this time I was drawn to the first verse, where it says “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.” It reminds me of an old hymn “We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land,” which was set to a modern tune in the musical

“Godspell.” The hymn’s chorus says this: *All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all God’s love.* We actually sing something similar to this every single Sunday, but I’d wager that most of you rarely think twice about it. What is the opening line to the doxology that we sing as the offering is brought forward? *Praise God from whom all blessings flow.* What if those words were on our lips and guiding our thoughts every moment of every day?

We wonder why bad things happen mostly so we can figure out how to avoid them. But our lives would be richer and more joyful if we turned the question around and asked how good things happen in spite of our imperfections and fallibility. Because good things do happen. In this world there is beauty and wonder and joy and surprising, miraculous acts of kindness and healing every day. James tells us to turn our attention to God, who in Christ, chose to be with us in our weakness—the God who is the source of every generous act, every perfect gift, every moment of grace correcting our flaws and completing our imperfections according to God’s loving plans. Yes, we are still to be doers of God’s works and not just hearers. But it is God who completes what we can’t finish—God who corrects what we mess up—God who seeks us out when we go astray—God whose mercy is everlasting. And most importantly, God will not work in this world without us. By grace we are saved through faithful doing and faithful living.

There’s more that can be said about this. On this Labor Day weekend, what if we truly saw our labors not as tasks for which we earn rewards but opportunities to act trusting in God’s grace to complete the good work we’ve begun? On this communion Sunday, we come together to receive food for our spiritual journey—not a meal we’ve earned but one freely given in spite of the wayward, imperfect path that led us to this table today. Frankly, more words won’t help this message sink in any deeper. So pause and thank James for his timely reminder about how every good thing comes from above—and find time to sing the doxology each day out in the world, praising God from whom all blessings flow.

AMEN.