

“Is what happens to us in life *meant to be*?”

April 19, 2009

Text: *Isaiah 43:1-7, Revelation 21:1-6*

Sometime last week I was listening casually to an interview on National Public Radio with a former football player from the University of Miami—a proud *Hurricane*—now an all-pro cornerback in the NFL.

He was a very articulate Young man and he was talking about his life growing up—about his hard working mother, sacrificing everything for her children; and his absentee father, who was never there when he most needed a father’s touch.

At one point, in reflecting on all of this and trying to tie it all together, he commented how he believed that *everything happens for a reason*.

Both in and outside the church, I hear this comment all the time. And I’m always a little bewildered by it. What I assume people mean by this is that everything that happens in their life is part of some divinely orchestrated plan. In other words, *it was supposed to be*. Or, more popularly, *it was meant to be*.

On the one hand, I understand how there is a certain comfort in ascribing to God (i.e., to some Master Planner) responsibility for everything that comes our way in life. However, if we push the logic on this, there are a host of prickly theological problems.

To begin with, if God were responsible for all the unspeakable devastation and tragedy in life, how could we believe in such a capricious and sometimes even cruel God?

II.

For example, in the final round of the Masters last Sunday, was Kenny Perry *meant to* lose his two shot lead with two holes to go and then go on to lose to Angel Cabrera of Argentina on the second playoff hole? Was that *meant to be*?

Or, did Kenny Perry simply make too many bad swings producing predictably bad results leading to his eventual loss?

And how about the endless violence between Israel and Palestine and the senseless loss of life on both sides! Is all of this death and its consequence of deep seeded anger and hatred *meant to be*?

Are the earthquakes—like the recent one in Italy—that ravage the earth *meant to happen*, along with the upheaval, devastation and loss of life?

And what about our loved ones who die in automobile accidents ... or motorcycle accidents, sometimes due to a drunk driver and other times due simply to human error? Hey, there are times when—tragically—we mess up. Are these accidents *meant to happen*?

III.

Immediately, we can see the theological problem here. What kind of a God would act in such a way?

Would God will for a good man like Kenny Perry to suddenly tighten up, play poorly and lose the most important tournament of his life?

Would God's plan for the universe somehow include the decades-long, ongoing horror and senseless death that takes place with Israel/ Palestine?

Does God wake up one day and say to God's self, *I think I'll quake the earth and kill and devastate some unsuspecting Italians?* Or, Mexicans, or Americans or whoever it is.

Does the God of infinite love and compassion greet the world one day and say, *Well, I think it's a good day for teenage mortalities in automobile accidents?*

God help us! Of course not!

Could we seriously believe in a God who would act in such a way? Everything I know about the God I find revealed in the scriptures runs totally against any such divine intent or orchestration.

The God revealed in Jesus and in the best of the Hebrew Scriptures is a God of infinite compassion and love, a God of unending mercy and forgiveness. It is a God who weeps with us in our pain and aches with us in our sorrow.

IV.

Friends, the Exile was *not* God's idea. It happened because of human sin—Israel's sin. Israel forgot who she was, lost her way, became all caught up in greed and power (sound familiar??), and Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar destroyed her for her arrogance. And in the aftermath, she found herself in a despairingly dark place.

In our Christian story, the Crucifixion was *not* God's idea ... NEVER! It was the awful, horrific consequence of abuses of Jewish Torah and Roman Law (the two most advanced legal systems of the day). Jesus died on a cross because of the sin of the world, not because of some preconceived plan of God.

For sure, God *used* the events of the cross to work out God's redemptive vision, just as God *used* the darkness and devastation of Exile to call Israel to a deeper, more inclusive vision of being God's people.

I will give you as a light to the nations, God said (through the prophet, Third Isaiah, to Israel in exile), *that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*.

What this means is that Israel would now—through her years of suffering and loss, her deep anguish and despair—she would now be a *beacon of hope* to the nations ... because she had learned the lessons of humility and humbleness of spirit that are required for greatness.

And to the world that put Jesus to death, God took *the death and the darkness of the cross and gave it LIFE ... and out of the life that burst forth, the love and compassion and forgiveness that were in Jesus spilled over into the lives of those who believed in him and became his followers*.

With both Israel in exile and the followers of Jesus after the resurrection what was *meant to be* is LIFE and hope, that God's vision of shalom and peace among all people's would live on, to the ends of the earth.

V.

It's important to note that what underlies all of this is that God creates us in freedom. As human beings, we have free will ... which means we're free to make choices.

So much of what happens to us in life is a consequence of some choice we make along the way.

- People choose to smoke and then die of lung cancer or heart disease.
- Other folks don't eat well, have high cholesterol and wake up one day with triple by-pass surgery.
- Or, with some of us, we buy a house we can't afford and—boom—when the economy goes south, foreclosure comes knocking on our door.

Are any of us surprised in any of these instances? Probably not.

But of course, that's not all; because not everything that happens to us in life is a result of our choices. Sometimes, it's just stuff happening—random stuff. You hear me say that all the time in sermons ... how stuff happens and through no fault of anyone; it just happens. And, again, so much of it is random.

- An airplane malfunctions and all the passengers and crew perish when it crashes into the sea waters below.
- We slip and fall and somehow hit our head on the hard snow, as with Natasha Richardson who died so mysteriously from a head injury when she was just practicing skiing—in a beginner’s class.
- Or, out of nowhere a driver doesn’t see a stop sign ... and innocent, unsuspecting people die (as with California Angel’s pitcher, Nick Adenhardt, who died so tragically in a car accident a short time ago).

None of this is God’s doing. As human being, we’re imperfect in all kinds of ways; and, again, all the time, stuff is happening.

VI.

The critical element is how we respond.

How do we deal with what comes our way? How do we adjust to our losses and setbacks in life? How do we respond to the awful violence that at times comes too close, and to the tragic events that happen at no one’s bidding?

Call it human error, call it sin; they just happen.

Another problem with the *meant to be* thinking is that it can be a copout. Where’s the individual responsibility? If it were *meant to be*, then there was nothing we could have done to bring about another result.

- I was *meant* to have a heart attack in my early fifties ...
- It was *meant to happen* that my house would fall into foreclosure ...
- Or, it was *meant to happen* that my business failed, even though many had told me of the risk involved beforehand and had counseled me to make different choices along the way.

One of the keys to our lives, friends is to make a life-style out of doing our best—everyday—to make good choices. Think about it! Every day is an opportunity—for each of us—to make good choices.

And when we do—even though we can’t totally control the outcome—good things tend to come our way. What is *meant to be* is that good deeds tend to produce good results; acts of kindness and love tend to make things better.

VII.

What God has for each of us is not so much a plan for our lives, as a vision. A vision for our lives—a vision of possibilities, of the different ways our lives *can* unfold. A vision of the way we can use the gifts God has given us for good—to make things around us better and to lift up the common good.

And God works tirelessly, in every human situation, doing what God can to redeem the world—to renew, restore, and redirect all of us towards greater good and greater beauty, and towards greater unity and love.

That's what God did with Israel in Exile; and that's what God did through Jesus on Easter morning. Always, God's passion for peace and unity moves us and all the world towards newness, and towards a larger, more inclusive world.

Listen to the poetic prompting of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away; and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming out of heaven from God ...

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, See, the home of God is among mortals.

**He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,
And God himself will be with them;**

**And God will wipe every tear from their eyes. And death will be no more;
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more ...**

And God said, *See, I am making all things new.*

May it be so! And may God's ultimate purposes be realized, both in us and through us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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