

“Give Me a Reason”

September 4, 2022

Half Truths series

Author and professor Kate Bowler has one of the best titles for a book: *Everything happens for a reason and other lies I've loved*. Now the phrase *Everything happens for a reason* can be a simple cause and effect statement, which may carry some truth, especially if we're talking about Newton's laws of motion. However, sometimes it's used in response to grief, suffering, and senseless things that happen, and when that's the occasion, it really doesn't help much.

Bowler writes with some skin in the game. Her area of expertise is the prosperity gospel - the theological idea that God rewards faithful people with health and wealth, that good things happen to good people. “Believe and receive” is the tagline. Bowler has studied prosperity gospel churches and preachers for years as an outsider, never thinking that it really affected her. Then she was diagnosed with late-stage cancer at 35 years old just after having her first child. Bowler realized in the midst of processing the news that she claimed a connection between virtue and success. She found herself asking questions and wondering where God was in all of it. *Why, God? Am I not good enough? What did I do?*

And Bowler heard the popular phrase often: *Everything happens for a reason*. Sometimes people say *God works in mysterious ways*. People were trying to be encouraging, but it wasn't helpful. Bowler's husband challenged someone who said it with this response: “I'd love to hear the reason.” Give me a reason! Have you ever wanted a reason? I wonder if they wanted to punch anyone in the face when they said it. I'm not condoning violence, but that's how we might feel.

It's one of those phrases that serves us well until it doesn't anymore. Pastor Adam Hamilton classifies it among these “half-truths” that we throw around so freely. Nicholas Clairmont says that *Everything happens for a reason* “manages to combine the maximum of ignorance with the maximum of arrogance.” That's not our intention - to be ignorant or arrogant - but it can certainly turn out that way, especially when we offer it to someone who is hurting. It becomes a platitude.

If we're honest, *Everything happens for a reason* doesn't really serve us well anyway. It's a cliché - and even a platitude. We hear it about big events - natural disasters that wipe out areas, pandemics that affect the world, and other even senseless acts of violence. There are times I've said it to myself to make myself feel

better or perhaps even to shirk personal responsibility, which it allows us to do when pushed to its limit.

There are times I've probably said it trying to help someone else, but then it puts the blame on God for things that happen and discounts the reality of free will. It makes God responsible for the things we do and poor choices we make. Do we blame God for the most heinous crimes? Does God will the worst of humanity? No, that's simply not true. Some things just happen. Sometimes it just sucks.

I told our worship team that these "half-truths" made me think of emojis that we often use now - simple faces to express emotions. It was Carole Koch who put it exactly right: "Verbal emojis are things that we say quickly to make ourselves feel better." But the spiritual clichés we offer don't answer the deep spiritual questions that suffering brings.

Even though we think it's a word of help and encouragement, I wonder about that deeper truth that it's really about our own comfort. We want to make sense of the world. We want to have a reason for why things happen. We want to feel better. We want things to be simpler. Kate Bowler says, "We want it all to count." But the reality is that we can't make sense of everything even though we really want to. Some things defy making sense.

Beyond the philosophical and theological world, this phrase gets some play, and especially now, there's more push back against it. If you look up this phrase, you'll find numerous articles that tell us not to say it. Thomas Koulopoulos writes, "Giving meaning to an event is a world apart from finding a reason for it. The former can exist in a complete absence of the latter. One clings to the past and the other focuses on the future." Making meaning is what we're called to be about. We're not always called to have a reason.

Navigating the muddy water of these "half-truths" requires us to do some theological thinking. I start with the premise that we're all theologians. We all seek to know and understand God. We all interpret Scripture in light of Christian tradition, our ability to reason, and our personal experiences. We try to make sense of the world every day. We may not agree on everything, but it's important that we muddle through some definitions of theological terms together.

SLIDE: *Providence* (God's governance of the cosmos). Think of the word *provider*. God is over all the world.

Sovereignty (God's authority or rule that doesn't depend on anyone else).

Christian faith and tradition claim God's providence and sovereignty, but there are different interpretations of these concepts. On one extreme, God is a micromanager. At the other extreme is God who created and then stepped away from creation.

John Calvin, a lawyer and theologian during the 1500s and an important leader in the Protestant Reformation, said that for God to be completely sovereign, God had total control. This is where we get the concept of

SLIDE: *Theological determinism/predestination* (God has predetermined everything that happens, even our salvation).

It becomes problematic because there is no choice. Everything is predetermined, and there's nothing that can change it. So, what about free will? Does anything we do make a difference? Those are the questions that arise. You see that it gets muddy. And in Scripture, we may read it differently and find support for different perspectives.

Wrapped up in all of this are some other important ideas.

SLIDE: *Dominion* (God gave put humans in charge of animals).

God is sovereign, but gives us responsibility for caring for creation. Right away in the creation story, there is choice - to follow God or not, to follow rules or not. We have the freedom to choose. We're not let off the hook for consequences of our choices.

Deism (God is Creator, but is more like an absentee landlord).

Deism was a popular theological concept, especially in the 18th century among the founders of our nation. It's the opposite of theological determinism. God is so hands-off that God isn't active in the world at all. This is problematic because we believe God is active in our lives and in the world through the Holy Spirit. God does work in us and through us (and sometimes in spite of us), and we're called to be open to God's leading and guiding. Our Methodist tradition falls in line theologically with a theological concept that's somewhere in the middle.

SLIDE: *Arminianism* (God is sovereign, but has limited control in relation to human freedom and their response to it).

This was a movement in the late 1500s in response to Calvin's teaching and was claimed by later Protestants, including John Wesley in the 1700s, who believed that God seeks salvation for all people. Some will accept, and some will reject, but the invitation is there. This is where we get Wesley's concept of the movement of grace in our lives.

SLIDE: Movement of grace in our lives: *Prevenient, Justifying, Sanctifying*.

God's grace is at work even before we understand it, which is why we practice infant baptism. When we accept that grace for ourselves, we are justified, but that's not the end. We continue to live in God's grace in the process of sanctification - seeking holiness of heart and life.

It's important to understand that these theological concepts have some grounding in Scripture, but Scripture is clear that choice and free will are paramount in our relationship with God. God invites us into relationship and includes boundaries and limits, and we respond.

In the passage we read from Deuteronomy, this comes right as the Israelites will enter the Promised Land. Moses has repeated the Ten Commandments - the Law - to the Israelites. They are almost to the Promised Land, and Moses asks them to choose life as God intends, which means that they love God and neighbor. If God has already determined what they will do, why the choice? Why the commandments?

Pastor Adam Hamilton even breaks it down further. The gift of dominion - responsibility and stewardship over God's gifts in our lives - brings questions of morality. How do our choices affect others? Choice sometimes involves risk, too, and we weigh the risks (or should) every day. God is sovereign. God is on the throne. **And** God gives us freedom. **And** God works through people.

All of that can be true, which is much more accurate than *Everything happens for a reason*. Rather than resigning ourselves to fatalism - that it doesn't matter what we do - perhaps a simple word for us is this: **SLIDE:** *Make good choices*. I've said this to my children, sometimes as a friend, and even to myself.

But we still have to deal with the "half-truth," especially in how we approach suffering - for ourselves, for people we love, and for a world where people are facing unimaginable struggles. Think about the news from this week. In Mississippi, people are waiting for clean water. Saying *Everything happens for a reason* is a bizarre response to someone's suffering.

In Pakistan, thousands of people are dealing with flooding. Is there a reason? God isn't putting flooding in the way of people. It's not God's punishment on a group of people. There are natural laws that govern how things work. There are choices we make. Saying *Everything happens for a reason* is trite and not a faithful response.

This is a reflection on suffering from Pastor Ray Firestone: "Suffering is not God's desire for us, but it occurs in the process of life. Suffering is not given to teach us something, but through it we may learn. Suffering is not given to punish us, but

sometimes it is the consequence of our sin or poor judgment. Suffering does not occur because our faith is weak, but through it our faith may be strengthened. God does not depend on human suffering to achieve [God's] purposes, but sometimes through suffering [God's] purposes are achieved. Suffering can either destroy us, or it can add meaning to our lives." That's profound and true.

Maybe our role can be to "flip the script" and change the cliché into something more helpful and meaningful. *Whatever happens, God is able to work through it, to redeem it, and to bring good from it.* That doesn't diminish suffering or lessen the pain of it, but it's more honest and faithful - and a better witness to God - Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Kasey Edwards writes, "So what should we say instead when something horrible happens...? ...stick with empathy and sincerity...: 'Yep, that really does suck and I'm really sorry this happened to you.'" Kate Bowler's deep theological truth is simple yet profound: "Life is so beautiful and life is so hard." Both are true and faithful.

This will be a challenging series because we have to do some deep theological thinking and digging. It's worthwhile to think about these "half-truths" we sometimes say and consider how we might flip the script.

Coming to the table of grace today is an act of faith. It's a choice to receive the gift of God's grace and to know that we need it. We don't save ourselves. It is God who saves. It is Jesus who emptied himself for our sake. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts and comforts us as we seek to be faithful. Join me in prayer as we prepare our hearts...

Let us pray...**CONFESSION**