

“Half Truth #1: All Things Happen for a Reason”

(Sermon series based on Adam Hamilton’s book, Half Truths.)

Psalm 8:3-6, 9; Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 7:24-27; Romans 8:28, 37-39

FPC/June 5, 2016

By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction to “Half Truths” Series

“Sacred cows”.....we all have them. **(Digital projection>”Sacred Cows; we have them.”)** These are the important things we believe. They seem to make sense of life. They “put the pieces together.” They help us make decisions that we believe are good. Sometimes they are beliefs that have been handed down to us.....and we’ve heard and repeated them so often, they just become part of who we are. And other times they are beliefs that come from our own experiences.....the hard things and the wonderful joys.

Years ago I had an old Italian neighbor, Ernie. He lived across the alley. He was good gardener, growing all his tomatoes and peppers for his sauce.

One spring he was very pleased when he saw me turning over some backyard grass sod for a small garden. **(Digital project>pic of tomato plant with ripe tomato.)** He came across the alley to our chain link fence. We talked gardening. He probably saw I could use some advice. Finally he said, “Never plant until after Memorial Day. Some years you may be tempted to plant earlier. But never do it. It can freeze. But after Memorial Day you’re always safe.”

So you know what I did last weekend.....Memorial Day weekend? I put in our garden and our flowers. I’ve been tempted for weeks. I’ve seen all the flowers and plants. I’ve watched my neighbors get a “head start” on me. But I always hear Ernie, and I never plant before Memorial Day Weekend. It’s a type of “sacred cow” for me.

Of course, there are “sacred cows” that are a lot deeper. These are the beliefs we trust, the people we love, and the things we hope in. We become defensive when they are questioned, and feel as if life is falling apart if they might not be true. For Christians these beliefs and loves and hopes are connected to how we put life and God and faith together. **(Digital projection>”How do you put life and God and faith together?” with puzzle pieces pics)**

The first part of the summer I will be doing a sermon series on a few of these beliefs that we hear, and perhaps pass on, because they sound so true.....but upon some deeper thought, we can see some real problems. They are “half truths;” getting it right here, but missing it over there. Over the next few weeks we’ll think about some of these half-truths we hear:

“All things happen for a reason.”

“God helps those who help themselves.”

“God never gives you more than you can handle.”

“God said it. I believe it. That settles it.”

And “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

As we think about these things, we might not always agree. And I might be wrong here and there. But the intention will not be to prove a point, or win a debate, or shake a “sacred cow.” The point is to encourage discussion, deeper thinking, and faithful living together. And the point is that these “half-truths” cause problems. They sometimes hurt the people we’re trying to help. They can push people away from God. They keep us from thinking deeper about life and God. They can be used to justify our own prejudices. And they can cause deep hurt in our own lives.

“Sacred cows”.....we all have them. Let’s talk about one: All things happen for a reason.” **(Digital projection>”All things happen for a reason.”)**

## II. Introduction to Sermon

“Mosquitoes,” he said. “What about mosquitoes?” I was sitting in an airplane next to the guy. We introduced ourselves. He was a high school biology teacher. I told him I was a pastor. Now usually when that happens the person next to me goes quiet. Or he or she will share some important spiritual experience.

But the biology teacher next to me went a different direction. He had a question. Or more likely he was questioning something he had been told: “All things happen for a reason, right? I mean, it’s God and God’s purposes behind it all, right? Mosquitoes. So what about mosquitoes?”

I figured he was toying with me a little, so I said, “Evolution. It’s survival of the fittest and adaptive change. Mosquitoes are survivors.” He was stunned. He then smiled.....and caught the irony; here was a biology teacher talking of God, and a pastor talking of evolution.

We then went on to talk some more. The school where he taught was going through a downsizing. He had been laid off. And a well-meaning friend had recently told him, “All things happen for a reason. It must be part of God’s plan for you.” The young teacher said he and his wife were struggling with that.....and struggling with a God like that. Do all things happen for a reason?

## III. Problems

Do all things happen for a reason? On one hand we would say “sure”.....actions create consequences. If I choose to eat too many chocolate chip cookies, there is a consequence. But the deep part of the question is not about cause and effect. It’s about purpose and control. And

it's about suffering. And it's about God. It's the question of the biology teacher on the plane: "Did I lose my job because of God's purpose in the world? Is that the reason?"

Do all things happen for a reason? Perhaps someone has said that to you in a difficult time of loss. Perhaps you've wondered about that. Perhaps you've shared that with someone in their loss. The intention is usually to share care and hope. But there are some problems. Was 9/11 part of God's purpose? Is God the reason for the tribal genocide in South Sudan? Is a failed marriage the result of God's plan? Does a biology teacher lose his job because it's God's will? At best I believe this is a half-truth. There are a number of problems.

One problem is personal responsibility. **(Digital projection>"Problem #1: Personal Responsibility")** If everything happens according to God's unchanging will, then whatever I do must be God's plan. I could have done nothing else. God must have wanted and needed me to do it...it's "God pulling the strings." If I take six months off, buy a new Corvette, and tour the United States and Canada, it must be God's will.....even if it creates problems in my family, here at First, and with our bank account. If it's God's will, I'm not responsible. That's a problem.

Another problem with "everything happens for a reason" **(Digital projection>"Problem #2: God is responsible for everything")** is that it makes God responsible for everyone's choices, and for the natural and often arbitrary ways of creation. ISIS and the horror it brings to lives.....is there a God reason? Hungry kids in our neighborhoods because the limited money is used to feed an alcohol or drug addiction....is that God's will? If a sink hole swallows up our home.....should I blame God? If everything happens for a reason, then all the tragedies of life have a divinely ordained purpose....and that creates a number of deep moral and philosophical and theological issues with God. That's a problem.

A third problem with "everything happens for a reason" **(Digital projection>"Problem #3: Fatalism")** is that it leads to fatalism and indifference. If everything is already set, why care? If I'm powerless to change things, why not just check out? Give up? Disconnect? Why not regularly eat the 10,000 calorie fettucine alfredo sauce I love **(Digital projection>pic of fettucine alfredo)**....because when it's my time, it's my time. In fact, why go to the doctor, work out, or save money.....doesn't that work against God's plan? And why feed the hungry, or support a shelter, or get help for an addiction.....doesn't it happen for a reason? If there's tragedy in other people's lives, why get involved? There's probably a reason.....and I couldn't change anything anyway. "Everything happens for a reason" thinking also tends to support our biases and prejudices....."It's just how it is for them. What can you do?" That's a problem.

#### IV. Answers

So are there some answers? I think so, and I believe so. I think the answers are found in the Bible. Here the challenge is to not just take a verse here, or a verse there. But to look for the big ideas.....the big themes in the Bible that are woven throughout its pages, and its 1000 year witness to different people's experiences with God. I believe we also need to see what was

modeled and taught by Jesus. And finally we can see what is lived out in churches when we are at our best.

Taken in total the Bible seems to say that the creation is a wonderful gift from God, and we are part of the created order. As part of the created order, we both share in the beauty and the sometimes changing, evolving, chaotic nature of creation. As part of the created order we don't live in bubbles. Disease happens. Tornados happen. Accidents happen. Life at times seems precarious. **(Digital projection>"It rains on us all.")** Or as Jesus tells us in Matthew 7, storms happen to those who build their lives on sand or rock.....it rains on us all.

But we are also given freedom and a mind to wonder within the creation. **(Digital projection>"We have been given freedom to choose.")** Psalm 8 reminds us that we are not gods, but we do have dominion to share in God's ways in the world, or not. Moses' speech in Deuteronomy 30 addresses this same freedom.....the freedom to choose a way of faithfulness and life, or a way of cursing and death. And Jesus' words in Matthew 7.....rock or sand, we have the freedom to choose.....the freedom to build our lives in ways of faithfulness or not. Life is not a play of puppets. Rather it is an open stage. We have a basic story, and a few lines. The rest we make up as we go.....as we decide if we will trust the One who has given us the story.

And the witness of the Bible is about the God who creates and loves. **(Digital projection>"God is free to act and love in creation.")** God is not an impersonal force, or a disinterested power. Rather the holy, eternal God is involved with the creation.....acting, caring, inviting, hoping, grieving.....inviting us to ways of life....the kingdom of God.....the new creation. And God is free to act when and where God will, never violating our freedom. And because God is God, and we are not, there is a mystery to God, and a humility for us. We have stories about the way God has acted our lives. And we have stories about God not acting the ways we had hoped. But the creation is open to the activity of God.

And one final thing. It's a big idea....a wonderful hope. It's the few words from Romans 8...often quoted, and frequently misunderstood. **Read Romans 8:28, 37-39. (Digital projection>Romans 8:28, 37-39 NRSV)**

**(Digital projection>"The Great Christian Hope.")**

I think this is what Paul is trying to say: "For everyone who is trying to choose a good way of life.....who is reflecting the ways of God in the world....who is building a faithful life on a rock.....God will pick up all the broken pieces of life.....and in the end make something more beautiful of our lives than we can imagine. That is our hope.....because we believe nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."

That is the great hope of the Christian faith, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus.

## V. Conclusion

"Does everything happen for a reason?" I think and believe more than that. I believe:

- We are part of a created world, where there is beauty and chaos...wonder and tragedy;
- We have a mind to think, and we are free to choose the way of our lives, and our choices impact ourselves and others;
- God is free to act and love in our world and lives, without violating our freedom;
- All the broken pieces of life will be gathered up by God, and in the love and power of God become something more beautiful than we can imagine.

Years ago I use to take my young kids up to Presque Isle. On one of the trips we got into collecting beach glass. **(Digital projection>simple picture of blue, green and clear beach glass on sand)** Beach glass is the broken bottles, plates and jars, rubbed smooth by the sand and waves. The clear glass is the hardest to find. The blue and green and brown glass is easier to see. The beaches at Presque Isle are long. We walked a lot that trip, looking for the beach glass treasure. We ended up with a sand bucket full, which sat in our garage for years. One of my boys was more into feathers. So we also came home with a bucket of sea gull feathers. Mysteriously that bucket did not sit in our garage as long.

A few years later I was down in Charleston, West Virginia at a conference. One of the side trips there was to an art glass studio. In the window and on the shelves were very nice glasses, and vases, and plates. But then I saw a couple plates and pieces of jewelry that were different.....beautiful.....parts blue and green and brown and clear and purple and red. They stood out from the other works. "What are these?" I ask. "They are beautiful." "Beach glass," the artist said. "I was up at Presque Isle in Erie, walked the beaches, and gathered up these broken pieces of glass. Here they were fired in the kiln, and became something new."

All the brokenness of life gathered up in the love and power of God to become something beautiful and new.....it is the great hope of Christian faith.

"Does everything happens for a reason?" **(Digital projection>"Nothing can separate us from the love of God.")** How about instead, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God."