

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 15, 2012
Lessons: I Samuel 3:1-10 and Romans 8:18-28

CALLED TO MEANING

God said, "Let there be light." And there was light!
God saw that the light was good,
so God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light "day" and the darkness "night."

Those words from the Bible's opening creation story are translated from Hebrew, and what may sound to us like a mere naming of the day and the night in our modern sense of labeling things as we find them is really something much more dynamic and interactive. Literally, Genesis says, "God called to the light, "day," and called to the darkness, "night." I'm reminded of a coach assigning players their positions for the game, let's say the basketball of my youth. "Dick, you'll be left guard. Tom, you've been playing right forward, but tonight I'm moving you into center." God is calling light and darkness both to play new positions. No longer will the darkness be a formless void because God is now taming it and assigning it a role in creation as part of the setting for life. Neither will light just be bright for itself, so to speak; it's brightness will lighten what will now become the day, and so light will shine for the life God is creating. God is calling everything, not just into being, but into meaning in relation to everything else for the purpose of life.

I believe the biblical idea of being *called to meaning* stands in contrast with the two extremes people seem most inclined to say they believe about the meaning of life. The negative extreme declares that life has no meaning, but rather that everything just happens randomly however it chances to happen without any guiding purpose. This denial of meaning, which I think often expresses bitter disappointment with life, is not new or just postmodern but at least as old as the Bible's book of Ecclesiastes which declares every human hope or endeavor just vanity and a chasing after the wind.

If life has no meaning, then death has no meaning, either, but also just happens. This negative attitude toward life seems rather like a black hole of the spirit, swallowing joy and hope while dismissing both faith and love as sentimental pretensions for the weak-minded who lack the courage to face the truth of life's emptiness. Most of us reject this extreme negativism because it is so hostile toward life and hope. In its view, there is no salvation, but that doesn't matter anyway because nothing really matters beyond the pleasure or pain

of the moment. I think there is anger in such apparent resignation to meaningless existence, perhaps restrained anger arising from painful disappointment with life, sometimes maybe even a feeling of having been betrayed by God. A teacher of mine called the bitterness of Ecclesiastes an unrelenting cry for a savior, even though it resists the very idea of a savior.

The other extreme, the positive one, declares that, "Everything happens for a reason," implying a good reason, maybe even God's good purpose or plan. So, if we can't make any good sense of something bad that has happened, we are told it happened for a good reason, anyway. At first, this positive declaration may sound helpful, and sometimes it can be if the injured person means, "I don't understand, but I will keep trusting God without outstanding." As an optimism that refuses to accept negative feelings, it is not helpful. If the first extreme rejects hope, this one rejects grief. The injured may protest, "What has happened does hurt and makes no sense," to which this no-negatives-allowed position replies, "Yes, yes, it hurts now, but it will all make sense someday because everything happens for a reason." In short, "Get over it, and get on with your life (and stop bothering others with your misery)."

There's a problem here. Where grief is denied or minimized, so is compassion. When outrage is dismissed, so is justice. Where protest is silenced, tyranny reigns unchallenged, whether it is the personal tyranny of being compelled to be happy and well adjusted all the time no matter what or the social tyranny that tramples people and their rights so the economy and the society can get on with business undisturbed, unchallenged, and unchanged.

No, everything does not happen for a reason, at least not for any good reason and certainly not for God's good purpose. Much that happens in this world makes no good sense, as Jesus clearly knew, taught, and proclaimed. Otherwise, why would Jesus have taught us to pray for God's will to be done on earth and to be delivered ourselves from evil? Why pray for change if everything already and automatically happens according to God's plan? I believe that unless we decide that Jesus' faith was weak and his understanding of God deficient, we need to find something stronger and more hopeful than mere resignation to whatever happens to happen in life – in your own life or the lives of other people and of human societies. Resignation fails to oppose evils done in our world, and it suppresses compassion for the grief-stricken, the wounded, the broken, and those cheated by life's chances or society's injustices. Resignation surrenders to life's unfairness without a fight. It denies hope any real vitality because it will not allow hope to make changes or even want changes. It just gives up and goes with the flow.

What the two extremes have in common is their insistence upon denying hope any real potency in human life. One says change will make no difference; the other says change is not really needed. There is no call to answer, no vision to pursue, no struggle in which to engage wholeheartedly.

Within the context of affirming hope for God's new creation – affirming it in the midst of bitter struggle and frustrating setbacks – Paul writes, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.” I believe those words are torn out of context and drastically misread when they are reduced to saying nothing more than that everything which happens does happen according to God's prescribed plan. That's fatalism, and nothing is more resistant to hope and change than fatalism. “What will be will be.” God, deliver us from such hopeless resignation to pain and pleasure, justice and injustice, love and hatred, prosperity and poverty, life and death.

My choice of a biblical word for God's way of calling us and our lives to meaning and purpose is “redemption.” What is evil, what is hurtful, what is wrong, cannot and should not be validated as good and right. Nothing justifies the death of a child. Nothing justifies the enslavement of people. Nothing justifies rape or torture. Nothing, and nothing should. The notion that some greater good can justify evils done along the way is itself the very heart and spirit of evil. Redemption validates no evil, excuses no wrong, and dismisses no harm done even to the very least regarded person as irrelevant to some good purpose supposedly in mind. No, Jesus warns us that what we have done to the least prestigious of his sisters and brothers, we have done to him. Redemption picks up the harm and calls forth something from it that was not there before, giving it new meaning it never had in itself, and changing the way it affects life and our future. “Tom, I know you've been playing your old position, but for tonight's game, I'm moving you into center. Take what you've learned, and use it. I believe you can do the job.” That's trivial perhaps, but I hope it suggests the idea. Take what you've learned and use it in a new way, for a new purpose with new meaning, because God is calling you into that new meaning for life.

“According to God's purpose” our translation says. Okay, but the danger is that what we will hear might mean no more than “according to plan” or even “as it is written in the script.” The word translated “according to” shows more movement than that. Used of direction, it means “toward.” It can mean “under,” as under a guiding purpose which is redemptive, which brings new good out of old evil.

I believe that in and through Jesus Christ, God is calling us to new meaning for life. The past cannot be changed in terms of what happened. It happened, and it's done. But the past can be called to new meaning so it moves us and our lives toward God's purpose. We are not chess pieces being pushed across the board by an invisible hand. We are human beings created to be deliberately responsive to God's love, to answer God's call freely and willingly. “Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard You calling I will go, Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart.” Please don't hear those words or sing them for me; let me do that. Hear them and sing them in life for yourself. Amen.