



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE THIRD SUNDAY  
AFTER PENTECOST**

**JUNE 18, 2023**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

By way of introduction – which does not count against our 10-minute limit, by the way, let me emphasize that what we say is grounded in our own spiritual reflections over the combined 150 years of our lives. We are on spiritual journeys like everyone else. Our understandings of God are rarely static. So we have rarely preached the same sermon twice, even though our lectionary of prescribed readings for each Sunday repeats every three years – and even though each of us has used the 10-10-10 format to hype attendance in the summer time. We might draw from previous sermons this summer, but we promise not to repeat them. We are not looking to avoid preparing sermons.

In my 10 weeks of Clinical Pastoral Education – a prerequisite to ordination – I was assigned as a chaplain to the neurology/neurosurgery floor at St. David's Hospital in Austin, Texas. CPE is an intensely demanding experience, designed to elicit introspection and self-awareness as well as provide an experience in pastoral care that was akin to being thrown into the deep end of the pool with only some theoretical instruction on how to survive in water.

On my first afternoon, the case worker on the neuro floor sent me into the room of a relatively young man who had just be told he had a deadly, inoperable brain tumor.

Walking into a room like that, as arguably a manifestation of divine presence, one best have a clear, well-founded understanding of God and humanity before saying a word. And to that end, every week we were required to write a one-page reflection on a profound theological issue like "How God Acts in the World."

Our purpose is similar: to provide information and insights that will enable you to form views and understandings that make sense to you, so that you can own and embrace them as your own, articulate them to others, and rely on them as you progress on your own distinctive spiritual journey. In other words, our words are not the word of God. May they stimulate thought, but never set up as concrete in your brain.

Now the pre-game show is over. Let's start the clock.

Today's topic is "Bad Things Happen to Good People. Why?" Our pastoral theology professor offered this perspective on why a young priest with a family – a good person, to be sure, had died in an automobile accident: He got hit by a "bleepin" SUV. That was the best answer our sage and leaned professor could come up with: He got hit by a "bleepin" SUV....He didn't say bleep.

And we all want to know ... why. Why would a God who we claim loves us, why would this loving, omniscient, omnipotent God allow this to happen. My life has not been long enough, or my experience broad enough, or my theological reflections deep enough, to produce a fully satisfying answer. Like the bumper sticker says, "Stuff happens." And it doesn't say stuff.

Paul reminded us that we see only dimly in this life.<sup>1</sup> So we may just have to accept that our merely human knowledge and capabilities are incapable of a definitive, gratifying, and reassuring answers to every question.

But here a few areas where my musings about bad things and good people have settled after 75 years:

First, God does not *cause* bad things to happen to anyone, much less good people. Some good souls do see God as judgmental or purposeful in inflicting pain and suffering. God did have a heavy hand in the Hebrew Bible. And, no doubt, Jesus suffered on the cross, arguably as an act of redemption. But any good atheist will tell you that they want no part of a God that would send a son to be crucified. And the greatest pain Jesus inflicted was on the money changers tables. He even healed the ear sliced off the soldier sent to arrest him and then chastised Peter for drawing his sword.

Moreover, a theology that admits to a god who triggers fatal auto accidents, mass shootings, war, and cancer for some undiscernible reason – or even for some supposedly good reason, like testing us, for example – places too much of a strain on the concept of a God who is a God of love. Remember, God did not test Job; God just allowed it to happen.

Finally, a God of wrath and suffering insinuates that we, made in or as the image and likeness of God, might also be justified in inflicting pain and suffering on others for some purportedly good reason. Yeah, that would never happen.

Second, we need to be very careful with the implications of saying that God has a plan or that everything happens for a reason, especially when it

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 13:12 ("For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.")

involves and justifies God's causing bad things to happen to good people – even on the path to a happy Hallmark Channel ending.

Do we really find comfort or satisfaction in God's causing a dear friend or relative to have cancer or die in an auto accident? Or famine in Africa. Would a loving God prompt a good driver to cause an accident? Or anyone to murder a child in a classroom? Is that really a God of love or a God we care to love and trust?

Third, the creation story reveals that everything God did was good. It was humans who corrupted things. We do not need God to cause bad things to happen. We do not need God to cause human beings to mistreat other human beings pursuant to some supposed plan for everything and everybody.

That actually would be inconsistent with how God really went about creation. We might say God had a vision, but not a plan as such. God created heaven and earth, called it good, and then assigned care of the earth and its creatures to us. But to allow our love for God and creation – including our neighbor – to be genuine, God gave us the gift of free will.

God did not create us as puppets on strings, destined to be slaves to God's plan or make things happen for a reason. Or even to love God

We are free to adhere to God's vision or to disregard and even resist it. And now we dare wonder why bad things happen to good people. God never needed us to cause pain and suffering. We have done quite well with that all on our own.

Fourth, in turning away from God, we left the idyllic garden of Eden behind. The natural world that God created did not exclude the possibility of hurricanes and typhoons and tornadoes and earthquakes and droughts and wildfires and floods and genetic mutations that produce vulnerabilities to disease or even the diseases themselves. We can argue whether humanity's tampering with nature has produced carcinogens and deadly viruses, but no one can doubt that disease exists in our daily lives. We can quibble about whether and how much human invention has caused or contributed to global warming, but we all know that when a hurricane finds the warm water of the Gulf, it will intensify. Property will be damaged. Lives will be lost. That pain will be quite real.

Fifth, we might still be troubled that God allows pain and suffering to persist. Couldn't an omnipotent God just put a stop to war and cure cancer on the spot? But again, that would be confounding God's own vision for

creation by trampling our free will and removing responsibility from humanity.

Furthermore, pain and suffering are not without purpose and benefit. The renowned Christian apologist C.S. Lewis wrote that:

We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."<sup>2</sup>

And we do need some rousing.

When we are comfortable living as functional atheists, surrounded by material comforts, with little or no need or regard for God or God's vision, how often is it pain or suffering, the death of a loved one, a dread disease, or a devastating accident that jolts us back to a healthy sense of our vulnerability and our utter dependence on God.

The great lesson of Katrina for us was the realization of our abstract understanding that stuff was just stuff, especially after simmering in eight feet of water for three weeks. And in appreciating our vulnerability, we learned how to let people love and care for us, which was very much new and different.

But let's not blithely say that everything happens for a reason in any sense that God inundated a major city so a couple of recent seminary graduates could learn to be loved.

Incidents of pain and suffering, however, do produce good works and heroes, which abound not only in the face of disaster, but also in our day-to-day lives. Ask any one of us who has filled the role of primary care-giver for a indisposed spouse, relative, or friend.

Lastly, let me share the best answer I have come up with – and not without considerable thought and prayer. If we lived in a perfect world, with no pain and suffering, where bad things never happened, opportunities to love and invoke God's presence never would arise. No one would ever need our loving assistance. No one would ever need God's support and strength. We would have no need for love. We would have no need for God.

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2976220-the-problem-of-pain> .