

# God's Intention

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## **Mark 1:21-28**

Many years ago, the son of noted preacher, William Sloan Coffin, Jr., was tragically killed in an automobile accident when his car plummeted into Boston Harbor. Soon after, Coffin preached about the death of his son – a sermon that over the years has been quoted often by many preachers, including this one. Here is some of what he had to say:

“When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, a woman came by carrying quiches. She shook her head, saying sadly, ‘I just don’t understand the will of God.’ Instantly I swarmed all over her. ‘I’ll say you don’t! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper or that he was driving much too fast in a storm? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road from Boston Harbor?’

“Nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘It is the will of God.’ My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

It was a wild morning in that synagogue in Capernaum. I suspect many of those in worship that Sabbath day came as we come here – looking for a little peace and quiet after a busy week, a time of centering and serenity. But then Jesus shows up and look what happens. The service has just begun and a deeply disturbed man suddenly cries out. Then the demon that torments him begins screaming at Jesus. (I find it interesting that often nobody knows who Jesus really is except the demons!) In response, Jesus commands the demon to be still and come out of the man. And, says Mark, “The unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.” You wonder what happened next. Did the presiding rabbi ask if there were more prayer concerns to share? Did he remind people of the potluck lunch following service? Hard to imagine how worship could have continued after such a violent interruption. What does this text tell us about Jesus, about God?

Well, clearly, Jesus does not hold back. Sabbath or no Sabbath, he reaches out and heals the suffering man. In the synagogue, in a private home, or on the street, he does not hesitate to confront evil and pain. Says William Willimon, “In this and similar texts, Jesus shows that his mission is more than preaching and teaching. It is also ministering to human need, even when that need is nothing less than demonic in its source. Strange, demonic powers seek to engulf God’s good creation, yet God does not just sit back and let those powers have their way. God shows up in Jesus Christ who rebukes these demons, literally scaring the hell out of them when they recognize that they have come head-to-head with one more powerful.”

Now I don’t want to get into a discussion as to whether or not people are literally possessed by demons, although clearly some kind of demonic force kept Green Bay from playing in today’s big game. I believe that in this text Jesus, rather than debating the existence of demons, makes it clear that the evil, suffering and pain in our world, and in our lives, are not God’s intention. And so he seeks to confront and overcome evil wherever and whenever it might be found. Sounds good, and yet... can we really believe that; can we trust that it is true? Again, we don’t have to believe in literal demons to know how often human life, our lives, are plagued by suffering and evil.

I think of the tragic story of the woman killed while standing on street corner in Santa Rosa. Two cars collided, one went up on the sidewalk where she was standing and she was instantly killed. I don’t know if you saw the story in the paper, but clearly, she was plagued by her own demons. She seems to have spent much of her life afraid and had done everything she could to protect herself from the world, from danger, from harm. Yet, as the account in the paper said, tragedy found her anyway. And not just her. I think of William Sloan Coffin, Jr., a man of deep faith and one of the most famous preachers in 20th century America. None of that gave him and his family immunity from suffering and pain.

I once heard it said that human suffering threatens all networks of meaning. I have seen that, even in my own family. I watched my mother just gradually fade away following the death of my sister. Life lost all meaning for her, and there was nothing we could do to save her. In the words of Barbara

Brown Taylor, “Our mind-boggling technology and national wealth have allowed us to relieve so much suffering that we have begun to believe it should not exist at all... And to help is feel safe from any possibility of suffering, we conform to an unwritten code – live in the right neighborhood, eat the right food, make good investments, be a good person – and tragedy, like a tornado, should skip right over you. It is an illusion, of course. We know how to relieve suffering, and we know how to evade it. What is hard for us is to confront it, with no power to make it go away...”

She continues, “For all its prominence in the Christian story, suffering is a great killer of faith. Long-time believers crash into their first wall of life-threatening illness and all the light goes out of their eyes... She says that she once believed in a loving God, but does not anymore. God is fired for failure to act.”

Again, we have seen this; some of us have lived it. But then I find myself returning to the words of Bill Coffin’s sermon: “My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” Do you find comfort in those words, consolation, hope? I do. In that sermon, it sounds almost like Coffin, in confronting his pain, has broken through everything he thought he knew – about himself, about life, about God – and been delivered to a new threshold of being, of understanding.

God is love, we say, but God did not create us as puppets. God gives us a wide berth to act freely on this earth, even when we stumble. We have some degree of choice and free will. And, for better or worse, we are also finite, mortal creatures. We get hurt, we suffer losses, we weep, our hearts break. To love is to risk pain and loss – that’s part of the deal. Sometimes this world is a hard place. But the same God who created us doesn’t stop loving us when things get tough. And so, to say that God loves us is to claim that such love is also risky for God who must weep over our losses because they are God’s losses as well. Again, in Jesus we meet a God who confronts evil straight on, not turning away from human suffering and pain, but entering ever deeper into it and bearing it as God’s own. I once heard it said that there is always a cross in the heart of God.

Michael Lindvall, a Presbyterian minister, shares this story: “Some years ago, I was moving furniture with a good friend, a junior high school shop teacher named John. The furniture was coming out of the apartment of a widow, Helen, a mutual friend who had made the wrenching decision to move into a nursing home... It was an unhappy moving day, emptying rooms full of memories into John’s truck.

“Each trip from the apartment to the curb seemed to set the two of us thinking about deeper things. We were about to carry out the headboard of the old mahogany bedstead when John suddenly stopped and, with a few carefully chosen words, spoke about the death of his infant child many years ago. I knew about it, but we had never spoken about it. He was silent for a moment. Then he set his end down and looked at me, nodded toward the heavens and said, ‘He’s been there, that’s all there is to say. God has been there.’”

Bad stuff happens and we ask, “Where is God?” Behind the question is the horrible thought that maybe this is all in vain, that maybe wherever God may be, it is far removed from here and the muck and mire of human life. But that, again, is why I find Bill Coffin’s sermon so helpful. Where was God when his son, Alex, died? Where was God when my sister took her last breath? Well, where was God when she was born. Where was God when she graduated from law school and decided to dedicate her career to helping those in need? Where was God when she got married and gave birth to two beautiful daughters? Where? Always right there, with Sheri, in love, until the end. And, I believe, God walks with her still. Where is God? Right here. God may not provide easy answers for all our painful questions, but God does provide God’s very self... unceasingly. Says Willimon, “Today’s Gospel reminds us that God does more than simply care; God does more than merely stand beside us in the darkness of our despair. God powerfully reaches out to us, rebukes the demonic evil that has thrown us into this horrible situation, and thereby lifts us up. Sometimes God lifts us up by providing us with good friends who also show up, speak a word of compassion to us, remember us in daily prayer, and thereby lift us up in ways we couldn’t lift ourselves. This too is God’s love.”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I am not able to stand here this morning and explain human pain, its whys and wherefores. And I certainly am not here to tell you it can all be put aside easily and with little effort. But I am here to share my faith and give my witness. With God there is always hope. God does bring order out of chaos, beauty out of ugliness, new beginnings out of despair, and life out of death. And God does this by journeying alongside us, going into the thick of life with us, and never leaving us alone. God does not cause suffering. God bears it. God risks a broken heart. And God will continue to do this until that time when God’ victory is complete, when every tear shall be wiped away and God’s gets what God’s wants for us... God’s beloved children.