

## The Wild Waters of Life

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

I love my job. I love being a pastor. Throughout the ages, Christians have considered being a pastor a sacred calling...and I also feel that way. But not necessarily in the way it is assumed. I don't think what I do is more important or more meaningful than what any of you do. Rather, I think it is a sacred calling because I have the incredible privilege of being invited in to those moments that are the most human – the moments of sheer beauty and joy and goodness and the moments of utter pain and tragedy. I am invited to be there when you are experiencing the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.

And after being a pastor for nearly 20 years, I've learned that while each of our lives are unique, there are also often common threads, common themes in how we try to make sense of our most human experiences.

And one of those common themes is how often someone says to me, "What did I do to deserve this?"

And what's even more interesting, is I hear that expression – what did I do to deserve this – on both extremes of the human experience.

When I officiated the wedding and before the ceremony, the groom said to me, with tears of joy as he was about to marry the love of his life, "What did I do to deserve this?"

And there was the time when I sat with a mother who's young child tragically had died – "What did I do to deserve this?"

One, a cry of immense joy. The other a cry of unbearable pain.

But the same words.

The same words, that are asking for a reason why? Why is life so good to me? Why is life so terrible? Why?

My guess is that all of us can relate to this need to understand why. Why is this happening? What did I do to deserve this? What did they do to deserve that?

We humans have a strong need to be able to explain our lives and why they take the shape that they do, and I think the reason is because we think if we can explain it, then we can control it.

We can see Jesus responding to that understanding in our gospel reading today. Listen again to these words from Luke 13:

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"*

People in the crowd told Jesus about some other people from Galilee – the same area where Jesus was from – that the Roman governor Pilate (the same Pilate who had Jesus crucified) had slaughtered. And Jesus wants to make sure that the crowds understood one thing about this

terrible event. The people who died were no worse sinners than everyone else. They weren't getting what they deserved. Jesus then, without being prompted, decides to tell about another tragedy of a tower that fell and again says, "They were no worse sinners than everyone else." In one case, the suffering is caused by a ruthless ruler and the other by a random tragedy – a tower collapsing, but in both, the suffering was not the fault of the people who suffered.

Friends, I think it is precisely because there is so much evil, so much pain, so much suffering in the world that we want an explanation for it. And to be fair, sometimes there is an explanation, but even in situations where we can point to contributing factors, there's still not one thing that we can point to that we can say it would have certainly been different were it not for....this. We live in a wild world that is filled with uncertainty, disease, chaos, and death. And if there is a sufficient explanation for all of this, I haven't found it and Jesus doesn't offer one.

The truth is there is no such thing as a suitable explanation. There is no rational, intellectual defense of God that works in the midst of human suffering. There is no easy answer that allows us to put the blame at the feet of someone or to find a higher purpose. So often, suffering just is and any attempt to explain it is to quickly fall into a judgmental theology.

One of my favorite writers is Kate Bowler – and if you're new to church here at United, you'll soon learn that I like to talk about Kate Bowler in my sermons a lot.

Kate is a professor at my alma mater, Duke Divinity school, and everything seemed to be going according to plan for her. She was happily married with a new healthy baby, her first book was published and her career was taking off and then, seemingly out of the blue, she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. She wrote a book called *Everything Happens for a Reason and Others Lies I've Loved* where she reflects on the explanations that so many people, including herself, tried to offer her to explain why she has cancer. And how none of those explanations were helpful.

But Kate also realized that while suffering just is, so too is goodness, so too is beauty, so too is love. In her book, she writes:

*I can't reconcile the way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, the gorgeous and the tragic. Except, I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out. The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors. I think the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.*

Life is so beautiful.

Life is so hard.

Our gospel reading today reminded us to not look for easy explanations for human suffering and certainly to avoid blaming the person for their own suffering, or for many of us, to avoid blaming ourselves for our suffering. The Old Testament lectionary reading that we used to write

our Call to Worship today, comes from Isaiah, and I think it helps us see more the truth of Kate's words – that life is hard, but life is also beautiful. Listen to these words from Isaiah 55:

*Everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.  
<sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
<sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

The book of Isaiah is actually broken down into at least two, maybe three, parts. The first 39 chapters were written as the people of Jerusalem were about to be conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile. Those chapters express pain at the plight of the people. Beginning in chapter 40, though, a later writer, one who is writing after the exile had ended and the people had returned home, writes through a lens of hope and redemption. But one of the things I find most compelling is how the imagery of water is used throughout. Early in Isaiah, the prophet speaks of the coming flood, of the people being washed away. Water is a destructive image and metaphor. But then, just as the tone of Isaiah changes in chapter 40, so too does the use of the metaphor. "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters," the prophet calls out. Now, the imagery of water is all about giving life. The same image, water, used to speak of suffering and also used to speak of life and hope.

Water is always the same substance – 2 hydrogen atoms combined with one oxygen atom to form a water molecule. That is true whether water is bringing life or destroying life. It is the same substance...always. About fifteen years ago, I went hiking at Yosemite National Park and our trail began by climbing to the top of 2 water falls. At the top of the second water fall, you can walk right next to the river above the falls and it is beautiful. The view, the sound of the water, the granite cliffs all around, and the 600 foot falls is one of the most inspiring, life-giving sights, I've ever encountered.

But here's the thing -- it's not safe either. Beside the river is a sign that says, "If you fall in the river, you will be swept over the falls and die." That's literally what it says.

The same water.

The same river that can inspire, that makes life feel so beautiful, so worth living, can also take life away.

I kind of feel like that's how all of life is. Life is filled with beauty and hope and joy. And life is filled with death and sorrow and pain. It's all a part of life and we do ourselves and each other a disservice by trying to explain either one too easily.

So may we let go of the need to place judgment on both the beauty and the pain of life, to let go of the need to try to explain either. And instead, to focus on how we live through each, to never take for granted that which is beautiful and hopeful and loving, and to resist blaming ourselves or others for that which is hard and difficult and filled with suffering.

And maybe, more than anything, we are invited to remember that regardless of what season of life we may be in, to remember that we do life together. We celebrate together in good times and we uphold each other in hard times – without explanation, without judgment. We are simply invited to be present in that moment.

And I think that is ultimately the gift that Jesus offers us. Jesus did not remove pain from us. But he did endure pain alongside us. He entered into our humanity and experienced the full range of joy and beauty and the full depths of suffering and pain – just like we do. And perhaps, the great gift in letting go of the need to explain, is that we just get to journey through this hard, beautiful life together.

I'll let Kate have the last word as she describes a conversation with one of her mentors:

*I had asked him about heaven. He knew what I was asking because he always knows. Will I be connected? Will I miss everything? Will I see my son sprout up and learn the rules of Canadian football? Can I see him graduate and be launched into the world? How many times can I sit beside his bed and watch his eyes squeeze tight as we thank God for toy tractors and the sticks we throw in the stream beside our house. These are the plans I've made. These are the hopes that are being ground into dust. And then I remember what he said next, "Don't skip to the end."*

*Don't skip to the end.*