

**ROAR:  
Bondage in Egypt**

**Exodus 1:6-14  
Romans 8:31-39**

*When life is unfair, God is good!*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
Fort Smith, Arkansas  
May 19, 2019

Beginning today, we will be doing something a little different in worship over the next five weeks. We will be basing our sermons and worship themes on the Scriptures that our children will be learning in Vacation Bible School, June 10-14. VBS is always a great week for our church, and we will have over 200 children, youth, and adults involved. This year we have a jungle theme, and the keyword is “Roar!” The underlying thought is the goodness of God, even and especially in the tough times of life. Today we are going to talk about how God is good when life is unfair.

On the radio show and podcast “This American Life,” one episode followed people who were currently living what they called “Plan B” for their lives. Their lives had radically changed because of some event or situation that had happened to them. Host Ira Glass took an informal poll to see how universal this reality was. He asked a room of a hundred people to think back to the beginning of adulthood when they were first formulating a plan for their lives, the direction each one expected their life to take. He called that “Plan A.” He then asked those who were still following this plan to raise their hands. Only one person professed she was still living Plan A; she was 23 years old.<sup>1</sup> Very few of our lives follow the plan we have laid out when we are young; that’s how life happens.

The Israelites in Egypt did not plan to become slaves. They had moved to Egypt during the time of Joseph to escape a famine in Israel. They had prospered in the rich soil of the Nile delta. As long as Joseph was remembered, the Hebrews had the favor of the Egyptian rulers. But eventually that generation passed. The new pharaoh and new leaders did not know Joseph. They were concerned that all these foreigners were living in their country. They were being overrun with immigrants! In fear of the Hebrews, the Egyptians instituted harsh policies subjecting the Hebrews to forced labor. When the Hebrews continued to prosper and multiply, the Egyptians became even more ruthless and hateful, until the children of Jacob became slaves in Egypt.

That wasn’t fair; it wasn’t right. The only thing the Hebrews had done was work hard and prosper, and this was the reward they got.

Slavery was a sad reality in most of the ancient world, and it continued for centuries. As our country was being founded, slaves primarily from

Africa were brought in to work the farms. As the plantation system for raising cotton grew, the need for slaves also grew. From the 1600's to the end of the Civil War, over 300,000 men, women, and children were brought from Africa and sold as slaves. Like the Hebrews in Egypt, they multiplied and spread even with the harsh conditions, until there were about 4 million slaves in America when they were emancipated in the 1860's.<sup>2</sup> Ripped from their homeland, separated from families, enduring harsh and brutal treatment, there was nothing fair about American slavery, either. It ended with the most destructive conflict in our history, and it is still a stain on the soul of our nation.

Unfortunately, slavery did not end with the abolition movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today slavery is the second largest and fastest growing criminal activity in the world. Human trafficking, as it is now called, generates \$150 billion a year using human beings for forced labor and prostitution. Relief agencies estimate 21 million people are currently enslaved worldwide, some 200,000 in the U. S., 55% of them women and children. Many governments have enacted human trafficking laws, and the United Methodist Women have been working with multiple partners worldwide against this injustice for ten years.<sup>3</sup> The magnitude and the unfairness of this practice is just mind-boggling. This is evil on a grand scale.

Something like human trafficking just seems overwhelming and distant. When we think about the unfairness of life, we tend to get more personal. We know the unfairness of life in our own experience. Perhaps you have felt the pain of injustice yourself. You know the devastation of tragedy in your own life. You know what it's like to be treated unfairly.

Last weekend we went to see a movie called "Breakthrough."<sup>4</sup> (Spoiler alert!) It's a faith-based film based on a true story about a 14-year-old boy named John who falls through the ice on a pond and nearly drowns. In fact, the medical personnel give him up for dead, until his mother prays over him for the Holy Spirit to breathe life into his body. Suddenly the heart monitor begins to beep, and over the next few days, John makes a miraculous recovery.

But when he returns to school, John faces the resentment of those who have not been blessed with divine intervention. Even his teacher stops him after class and asks him, “Why do you think you got the miracle?” The teacher’s eyes well up with tears, and she says, “My husband’s been dying with cancer for two years.” It was an unexpected turn in a “miracle movie.” But I am glad they raised the question.

In a few weeks at Vacation Bible School, we will teach our children, “When life is unfair, God is good.” What does it mean to affirm the goodness of God when evil, injustice, and oppression are such a stark reality in our world? If God is good, why didn’t God answer my prayer? Why didn’t I get a miracle? Why did that disease, that accident, that crime happen to me? What does it mean to say “God is good” when life is so unfair?

**It means that God is not the source of the evil in the world.** We see evil, injustice and oppression on all sides. Life is unfair everywhere. Does that mean God is responsible for all the bad stuff? No, not at all. This is one of the fundamental religious questions we ask: If God is good, why is there so much bad in the world? The reason is that God created the world in freedom. The reason God introduced freedom into creation was that God created the world for relationship. God made human beings because God loved the world, and God wanted us to love God back. God wanted humankind to respond in faith to the creativity of God. But love and faith cannot be coerced; they must be free. So God made the world in freedom.

From the very beginning, this went badly. Adam and Eve used their freedom to make a bad choice to disobey God. That began a pattern that continues to this day. That pattern is called sin. We see it in the Egyptian oppressors, the American slaveholders, and the people who abduct and coerce women and children into slavery today. Even creation is broken by sin. Tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes happen because the laws of nature operate freely. They may be more predictable than they have ever been, but they are still not fair. Paul writes in Romans, “*Creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*”<sup>5</sup>

I think you can see what happens if we make God the source of everything that happens. God becomes the engineer of all manner of unfairness: natural disasters, accidents, tragedies, diseases and death. Do we believe in a God like that? Do we want to worship a God like that?

I believe God's purpose is still the same for creation: love, faith, relationship, goodness. So Scripture says, "*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.*"<sup>6</sup> Until creation experiences redemption and the Kingdom of God comes in fullness, we will still have to deal with the unfairness of life.

**But that means that even in our suffering, God is with us.** Now we're talking some goodness! When we experience the unfairness of life, and we will, God suffers with us. God's divine heart is open to us. When the Hebrew children cried out to God under the oppression of the Egyptians, God heard their cry. At the burning bush, the Lord told Moses, "*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*"<sup>7</sup> When life is unfair, God is good.

Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans to a small community of Christians trying to practice and spread their faith under the nose of one of the most brutal and oppressive regimes in the history of the world. You remember they had to retreat to the catacombs to worship. But Paul writes, in some of the most inspired words in Scripture, "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ...What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"<sup>8</sup>

I read that text in almost every funeral I do, because in those deep, dark valleys of life, when you are stung by the unfairness of the world and your loved one has been taken away from you, there is nothing you need to know any more than that God is with us. God is always with us.

**Finally, to say that God is good when life is unfair is to say that our faith helps us cope with the unfair situations in our lives.** Bad stuff is going to happen; you can count on it. Sometimes it seems like more than we can bear. But we can bear it. We can bear it because we are people of faith. Our faith gives us hope. Our faith gives us courage. Our faith gives us strength to overcome our difficulties. In fact, it may be the bad stuff that makes us better.

Malcom Gladwell wrote a book called *David and Goliath*, in which he documents the lives of many successful leaders and entrepreneurs who succeed not in spite of challenges and suffering in life but because of them. He calls this phenomenon "the advantage of disadvantage." Did you know about a third of highly successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic? It was a struggle for them to read and to make good grades in school. A researcher was speaking to a prominent university donors' meeting filled with successful business people. When she asked how many of them had been diagnosed with a learning disorder, half of the hands went up.

Gladwell's insight on this is profound: "There are two possible interpretations for this fact. One is that this remarkable group of people triumphed in spite of their disability: they are so smart and so creative that nothing—not even a lifetime of struggling with reading—could stop them. The second, more intriguing, possibility is that they succeeded, in part, *because* of their disorder—that they learned something in their struggle that proved to be of enormous advantage."<sup>9</sup>

When you operate from a core of faith, even the struggles of life can be turned to a higher purpose. Problems can make you perform better. Difficulties can make you dynamic. Tragedies can lead to triumph. Like Paul said, "*In all things, God works for good.*" Especially in the unfair times of life.

In 2008, Dan McConchie was the vice president of government affairs for a non-profit in Washington. He was riding his motorcycle through a

suburban intersection when a car came into his lane and pushed him into on-coming traffic. When he awoke two weeks later in a Level 1 trauma center, he was a mess. Six broken ribs, deflated left lung, broken clavicle, broken shoulder blade, and five broken vertebrae. Worst of all, amidst all the broken bones, he had a spinal-cord injury that left him a paraplegic. The neurosurgeon told his wife that it would be a "miracle" if Dan ever walked again.

Ten years later Dan is a State Senator in his home state of Illinois. But he is still in a wheelchair.

"What I learned," Dan said, "is that this life isn't for our comfort. Instead, the purpose of this life is that we become conformed to the image of Christ. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen when everything is unicorns and rainbows. It instead happens when life is tough, when we are forced to rely upon God through prayer just to make it through the day. That is when he is most at work in our lives, molding us into who he designed us to be. ...My prayers are different today than they were [ten] years ago. Back then, I looked at God like Santa Claus. I asked him to send nice things my way. Now, I have one prayer that I pray more than any other: 'Lord, may I be able to say at the end of today that I was faithful.'"<sup>10</sup>

That's not a bad prayer to end on today. Life is sometimes unfair. God does not send the evil upon us, but in fact, God is with us in the tough times of life. This faith can give us strength to endure and power to overcome. This faith is a gift from a God who is good all the time.

Lord, may we be able to say at the end of today that we were faithful. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Carattini, "Redirection," *A Slice of Infinity* (7-5-17)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_United_States).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/ht/packet.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Grant Nieporte, based on the book by Joyce Smith, *Breakthrough* (Fox 2000 Pictures, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:20-21.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Peter 3:9.

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 3:7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:28, 31, 35, 37-39.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Clark, *The Problem of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 120-121.

<sup>10</sup> Dan McConchie, "Prayer and Faith in the Midst of Personal Tragedy," *Washington Times* (3-22-16).