

You ever come across a good TV show? A good show has good writers and an excellent producer that can bring the storyline to life. They know the big picture, they know the end, and orchestrate each episode in ways that lead you to the end without giving it away, often taking you on an emotional roller coaster as they know how to play with your feelings to keep you hooked, wanting to watch one episode after another. Like a puzzle, each episode builds on the next, nothing is accidental, everything happens for a reason as the producer is in full control. Every scene, every dialogue is precisely calculated to serve the purpose of the grand and surprising finally.

For many people, life can sometime seem like a TV show, where God is the grand producer orchestrating everything that happens.

In faith we claim that God is omnipotent, with a universal power who does what he wills and can will anything. We also say that God is omniscient, who knows all things, past, present, and future. So a common conclusion then is that everything that happens, happens because God who is omniscient and omnipotent wills it to happen. Like a producer, everything is calculated, and everything that we go through, good or bad, is for a reason.

This is a very comforting way of looking at the world. It is comforting to think that everything that happens is part of God's will, God's plan. If there is a sudden death in the family: it was God's will. If a relationship did not work: it was God's will. If we end up losing a job: it was God's will.

We like to think that nothing happens for no reason, that life is not up to chance, life is not random. That events, good and bad, are like puzzle pieces that

God slowly puts together and eventually we will see the big picture and finally get to understand why things happened the way they did.

Everything happens for a reason is a popular phrase amongst many... but is that what the gospel teaches? And if not, why do we prefer to think that is how God operates? I think we like it because it takes a burden off us, it helps us feel less responsible for what happens in the world as we place those responsibilities onto God. After all, if God is the creator and the one with ultimate power, surely God is ultimately responsible. That is our human inclination anyway: people within their religious beliefs often point at God as the source of all things, good and evil. Think of our own tradition, Adam blames God for falling into temptation because ultimately, God did put her in the garden with him... he was not the one to blame, it was God who orchestrated that move.

But, what if God is not like a master producer orchestrating every event of our lives? What if there is more random chance in the world and in our lives than we would like to think? What if our actions, mistake or not, have more to do with us and less with God? What if all things do not necessarily happen for a reason?

That is an uncomfortable thought, depressing even. I prefer to think otherwise, but alas, that is what the gospel is meant to do in us today: make us feel uneasy, uncomfortable, but for a good reason.

That is at the heart of Jesus' unsettling words today: I came *not* to bring peace but fire... And what fire is he talking about? No, it is not the nice warm fuzzy fire we normally associate with the Holy Spirit and love. This fire is a painful fire, one that causes the division of families. What is going on here?

Jesus is using fire to describe the effect of his baptism. Recall from the homily on his baptism from months ago, it was actually a horrific scene because of what it meant. Far from the nice image of the heavens opening and a peaceful dove descending over him, he was being baptized, submerged, drenched in, the sins of the world, sins that were hidden in human society from the very foundation of the world, and this would become clear when he was exalted on the cross.

What is the cross? It is the unveiling, the display, of human sin for all to see. When we look at the cross, we are looking at our rejection of God who is all good, all knowing, all loving, and what is most scandalous is that even though God is all knowing, and knew that if Jesus was to become incarnate this would be the end result, he still chose to hand over his only son, and did so because the cross necessarily exposes the worst of humanity and reveals *our cooperation with evil*. The cross helps us realize that no, we cannot blame or the burden on God for everything that happens in the world – this one was totally on us.

Now, evil does not want to be exposed, we don't want to recognize that sometimes we are the ones to blame... evil prefers to remain hidden, unnoticed in the human heart and society, but now exposed it has nowhere to hide. Now exposed we have the ability to recognize human evil, reject it, and embrace the values needed to create the kingdom of God.

The fire of Baptism then, is the tension that arises when Christians reject the sins that led to the cross, and embrace the values of the gospel – the value of love. But there is a problem: that now exposed, evil has no option but to shamelessly put

us in direct conflict with one another: son against father, mother against daughter... mother in law against daughter in law.

Not that these things were not happening before. Jesus is quoting the prophet Micah who warned people that rejecting God's word would lead to divisions in the home and that is what happened then... lesson being, people have struggled with the mother-in-law since the beginning of time!

The difference now that Jesus is trying to get us to understand is that our baptism makes us capable of

- 1) recognizing our responsibility in the divisions, and
- 2) makes us capable of responding to this tension with a different kind of fire, not one that fuels division, but one that heals it: the fire of the Holy Spirit, the decision to love.

That is the good news in all of this, amidst the blazing fire of family and social drama is the all consuming fire of God, and that one leads, not to division, but towards a unification of all things – and that we know to be the end. While we might like to think that everything that happens is for a reason and it is all part of God's plan, the fact that we have a choice in all of this is even better.

Unlike a TV show where we are taken from plot twist to plot twist not knowing the ending, God is not out orchestrating every event in our lives, causing a family member to get sick with cancer, causing a divorce, causing an accident, just to play with our emotions for the sake of teaching us lessons.

Family, the uncomfortable gospel of today reminds us that the goal of the Christian life is to discover that *God works all things for the good of those who love him*. There lies the difference between “**everything happens for a reason, it is all part of God’s plan**” and what the gospel actually teaches: **that I am responsible for my choices and actions, and in baptism I have received the grace make the choices that will direct my life towards God’s ultimate revealed plan.**

One makes life seem like a tv show, as we unrealistically feel better by putting the burden on God, hoping we are just mindlessly being moved towards a good ending. The other is life real, giving us a chance to be participants in God’s work on earth, making us accountable and active participants in this race towards that good ending.

That is the beauty of the gospel today – a life of cooperation with God.

Speaking of good endings, I just wanted to take a moment to give my deep appreciation to Max as his time with us comes to an end.