

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Born in London in 1893, World War I would truncate the seminary education of the Rev. Leslie Weatherhead. Trained a Wesleyan, he served Methodist congregations before, in 1936, he accepted the call to his hometown's "City Temple" – a "Non-Conforming"² congregation of Puritan roots, yet, for the three generations before his cure, sprouting with social progressivism. His life and ministry shaped and shadowed by war, by the time of Weatherhead's call back to London he could surely augur the portents for Western Europe, nightmares to be realized before the end of the decade.

Sermon Series I: God's Intentional Will

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023

Between 1940 and 1941, the German blitz ravaged City Temple's building, leaving the structure uninhabitable. For the duration of World War II, the congregation convened in a nearby Anglican church. With City Temple in rubble down the block, nearly one million of his kinspeople dead in battles and bombings, and the world still at war, Weatherhead preached a series of sermons to consider God's will in the face of so much suffering.

To sharpen the point of his inquiry, he recalled: "I have a good friend whose dearly loved wife recently died. When she was dead, he said [to me], 'Well, I must just accept it. It is the will of God.' But he [is] a doctor, and for weeks he had been fighting for her life. He had called in the best specialists in London. He had used all the devices of modern science, all the inventive apparatus by which the energies of nature can be used to fight disease. Was he all that time fighting *against* the will of God? If she had recovered, would he not have called her *recovery* the will of God? [Surely] we cannot have it both ways. The woman's recovery and the woman's death cannot equally be [God's] intention;"³ both outcomes cannot be God's chosen purpose.

Though he recognized the momentary reassurance his friend found by fitting his grief within the arc of "God's plan," Weatherhead also recognized the long-term damage those ideas wrought. In response, he asked: "What sort of a God [would this be], who of his own intention ... pours misery undeserved and unhappiness, disappointment and frustration, bereavement, calamity, and ill health on his beloved children, and then asks them to look up through their tears and say, 'Thy will be done'? **We simply must break with the idea that everything that happens is the will of God in the sense of being his intention.**"⁴

To "break with the idea" that earthly event happens at God's command – a heavenly hand moving pieces on a great, cosmic board – Weatherhead divides God's will into three categories: the *intentional* will of God; the *circumstantial* will of God; and the *ultimate* will of God.

To distinguish between these "wills," he points us to the Passion narrative of Matthew we read today, asking: "Was it God's intention from the beginning that Jesus should go to the Cross?"⁵ the very question before *us* every Palm Sunday. "The answer [must] be **No**," he explains, for "[Jesus begins his ministry] with the intention that [people] should *follow* him, not kill him. The discipleship of [neighbors], not the death of Christ, was the intentional will of God."⁶

The *intentional will of God*, then, is God's "ideal purpose," God's first intent for the creation.

Weatherhead continues, "But when circumstances wrought by [humankind's] evil set up such a dilemma that Christ was compelled [to] die or to run away" – or, I would add, to fight back – "then in those circumstances the Cross *was* the will of God, but only in those circumstances, which were themselves the fruit of evil. *In those circumstances* any other way was unworthy and impossible, and it was in this sense that [Jesus] said, 'yet not what I want, but you want.'"⁷

The *circumstantial* will of God, then, is God's purpose within a particular historical context, God's hope within the boundaries of a mortal moment.

Finally, Weatherhead proposes we also refer to the will of God when "we mean God's ultimate [purpose] which, in spite of evil [arrives as if] the intentional will of God could have been carried through without frustration ... not that everything that happens is [attributable to God], but that nothing can happen which *finally* defeats God's will. So, in regard to the Cross, God achieved his final goal not simply in spite of the Cross, but *through* it."⁸

The *ultimate* will of God, then, is the creation's fulfillment, what we in The Episcopal Church name as "the restoration of all people to unity with God and each other in Christ,"⁹ and, for Weatherhead, that final desire of God is an inevitability that will not, cannot be overcome.

[See, I *intended* to begin this sermon series last Sunday – a long-settled schedule, a lovely plan. However, *circumstances* deferred our program for a week. Therefore, as we now move from palms to pathos, we instead begin the series today, making the best of our new situation. God and COVID willing, we will still *ultimately* crescendo on Easter Sunday (for, appropriately enough, this short detour has not changed our final destination).]

God's intentional will;
God's circumstantial will; and
God's ultimate will.

Weatherhead interrogated ideas of God's intentions and purposes as a pastor intimately engaged in the work of serving a congregation. Endeavoring theodicy – the defense of the Christian God in the face of suffering – he asked demanding questions of what he and the City Temple community were enduring. In effect, he sought a faithful reconciliation of three propositions:

God is all-loving;
God is all-powerful; and, yet,
God's people suffer.

For Weatherhead, the caprice of disease and the depravity of war challenged God's goodness with a fundamental question: *If there is a God, and that God is loving, and that God is omnipotent, then how could that loving, omnipotent God allow these horrors to happen – from Jesus on the Cross, to a world crucifying itself by violence.*

We, as those in Weatherhead's cure, ask the same questions of our situations. Many of us choose to understand suffering as part of an inscrutable plan that God comprehends, but that we, as mere mortals, cannot. In this conception, God causes suffering to bring about a greater end, to accomplish a higher purpose. Like the physician friend Weatherhead recalled, we prefer a God in charge of *all* the world – its good *and* its ill – for the promise of a future righting of the scales. "The Lord called another soldier to the heavenly ranks ... God's garden needed another bloom," we blithely say in response to one another's greatest losses.

The atonement theologies so deeply imbedded in our prayers and tradition propose the Crucifixion as a transaction, God having bartered Jesus' torture to "pay for our sins." Related,¹⁰ some take *on themselves* responsibility for their loved ones' suffering, looking to exempt God by accepting their wife's disease or their son's death as their fault: "I didn't pray hard enough," we say to ourselves, "My faith was weak," or, most egregiously, "I deserve this."

Variations of this last reconciliation view suffering as a divinely scripted proving ground, a test God intends to measure us, a tool God deploys to inspire others' faith. Depending upon one's character and capacity, God assigns hardships on a sliding scale: "God doesn't give us more than we can handle," we speak out of this broken theology.

Though the familiarity of these strategies may (seemingly) ease uncomfortable encounters with the grieving and the dying – may allow us to compartmentalize the news stories that run on the kitchen TV while we make our supper – these ideas subordinate God's Love to God's power, and conceive a God who expresses identity through horror, rather than hope. Weatherhead – *forcefully*

– pushes back on that view: “We can turn back a hundred years and wonder [how Christians] could sing hymns to God while slavery was rife[, yet] a hundred years hence *our* descendants will turn back and become incredulous that we ever called ourselves by the name of Christ when his body was [trampled] in our streets, exploited by big business, left to disease when medical knowledge and skill were within reach of the human family, and mutilated by the bombs and burning steel we dropped on one another’s cities. Call these things evil, call [them] widespread sin, but don’t [dare] call them the will of God.”¹¹

While Weatherhead’s argument for the *inevitability* of God’s ultimate will keeps a tether to God’s omnipotence, I urge us to resolve the theodicy dilemma by *removing* the “God is all-powerful” claim from our propositions:

God is all-loving; yet
God’s people suffer; because
God is *not* all-powerful.

Believe: God’s intentional will is always life, always Love. God *never* intends suffering and will *not* torment humankind – not Jesus, not anyone. Rather, God grants us a gift of freedom so full, so complete, that God self-limits the Divine power to share it. In turn, we receive the responsibility attendant to that blessing: we must choose the good over the ill; God will not make the choice for us. Therefore, if we nurture meanness, feed our greed, elect for war ... then we will suffer the consequences – not at God’s hand, but by our own.

The scene at Golgotha pulls taught these tensions of God’s will. The passers-by deride Jesus’ fleshy weakness, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross,” they taunt him.¹² The religious leaders mock Jesus, “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to,”¹³ if God wills it. The godless bait Jesus and his followers into believing in a God who terrorizes rather than loves. In misery, Jesus feels abandoned and cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And then he dies.

As we dare look upon this scene, be clear that God did not hang Jesus there, *we did*. “Crucify him!” we cry out. “Crucify him,” we shout again.¹⁴

The Cross stands as no monument to God’s intentional will, but as a testimony to Jesus’ faithfulness and our condemnation of ourselves, our choice to torture and murder the one who loves us most.

How do we make sense of Jesus’ cry?

What do we do with ourselves, at the foot of the Cross?

What is God’s will in such a circumstance?

We will consider the circumstantial will of God – distinguishing between struggle and suffering – as we continue our explorations on Maundy Thursday.

With singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ From Psalm 31.

ⁱⁱ That is, refusing to abide by the English *Book of Common Prayer*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Weatherhead, Leslie. *The Will Of God*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1974, pp. 9-10.

^{iv} Weatherhead, p. 17.

^v Weatherhead, p. 14.

^{vi} Ibid. While mindful to honor his voice, I do tidy some of Weatherhead’s gender-specific references to God.

^{vii} Weatherhead, pp. 14-15. Weatherhead quoted Matthew 26:39 in the King James version; I changed the translation to the NRSV, matching what we read during worship.

^{viii} Weatherhead, pp. 15-16.

^{ix} From “The Catechism” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855.

^x As the thinking goes, because our sins are so terrible, the “payment” must be equally awful.

^{xi} Weatherhead, p. 20.

^{xii} Matthew 27:40.

^{xiii} Matthew 27:43.

^{xiv} Matthew 27:22-23. For the purposes of the Passion reading, we adapted the NRSV rendering “Let him be crucified!” to “Crucify him!”



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WORSHIP

Sunday Schedule

- 8 am** Holy Eucharist, Rite II, *spoken*
- 9 am** Coffee & Community Hour, full “Community Breakfast” on the first Sunday of most months
- 10 am** Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with organ, choristers, and choir. Includes Children's Homily & Nursery. Morning Prayer last Sunday of most months. online at trinitychurchboston.org/live-worship and facebook.com/trinitychurchboston
- 11:15 am** Formation for All Ages
- 5 pm** Holy Eucharist, Rite II

Weekday Worship at Trinity

- Tues/Thurs.**
- 8:30 pm** Online Compline join us on Zoom at bit.ly/tcbTTcompline or dial in with 1-646-558-8656 and enter Meeting ID 206 654 379
- Weds.**
- 5:45 pm** Choral Evensong (returns 4/26) in the Church, led by the Trinity Choristers

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