

### What Now?

The week started out like any other week-It was a Monday (and I would try to ease into Mondays and take it somewhat slow after Sunday because of all the energy that it took to get through two church services, a Sunday school class, confirmation class, youth group and sometimes even an evening meeting!)

It was the summer of 1994, my second year as an Associate Pastor of Old South Church in Reading MA which was my first church that I served after being appointed. The Senior Pastor was away and would be for quite a few more weeks so I was “in charge!”

As usual, I read the Scripture prescribed or suggested for Sunday and it was from Paul’s letter to the Romans, “And we know that all things work for good those who love God.”

I read the Scripture in advance so that I can think and pray about it and look for ways to tie it to everyday life so that by Sunday morning I’ve sort of “lived with and lived into” the passage.

Right after lunch on Monday I received a call from one of our retired but extremely active members. She was crying, “My dear pastor, I’m losing my mind and I *know* it. I’m aware that I am doing things and saying things that make no sense but I’m doing them anyway. I managed to calm her down, get over to visit her and set up a time to meet with her family. Yet each day she would call me several times a day saying basically the same thing but with no recollection that she had already called! What? Next thing I know, I got word that one of our homebound members had been hospitalized with another stroke. The first stroke years ago had left him paralyzed and living in his family room on a hospital bed with his wife of forty years and many nurses and aids caring for him. Earlier, he told me that he could bear this existence because he could still read and the living room looked like library. That man read constantly! This second stroke took his ability to read. What?

Next, I received a call asking for prayers for safe travel for a young woman parishioner whose dad had taken a vacation to Florida and while there suffered a serious stroke. The family waited for him to be stabilized then flew him to Boston for the best medical treatment. The day he arrived in Boston a nurse gave him the wrong medication and he died, What?

Now what was that Scripture again?

“And we know that all things work for good for those who love God.”

Now let me tell you, I knew each of these people very well and they **loved** God.

My heart sank and I began to think, “How can I preach *that* scripture this Sunday. Surely I’ll pick something else.”

I stand before you this Sunday and I find myself in a similar situation.

Heartbroken and wondering, “What will I preach? What word of God can I bring to help ease our pain?”

Most of you know that on Wednesday of this week our beloved Donna Ridge who was struggling to recover from a brain aneurism that occurred in early January, took a

turn for the worse. The seizures she was experiencing could not be controlled and she is now in the final days of her life. What?

Our thoughts feelings and emotions are all over the place. In case you are relatively new to Wesley Church or didn't have the pleasure of knowing her, let me take just a moment to tell you about Donna. She sits over by that window, and often sets up our coffee for fellowship time. Her fabulous talent for hand crafted items always graces our fair. She is an amazing mother, wife daughter, grandmother, sister and friend. To know her is to truly love her. She is generous, strong, humble, kind and she would do anything to help anybody!

We cannot believe this has happened! We prayed for her to be healed. We begged for her to be healed and if the truth be told many of us are furious with God and believe me I've had my moments and conversations this week with God. We wonder why? Why couldn't Donna be healed? And, if we'll admit it and I will: there is even a part of us that wonders why not someone else—you know someone else who is not loving, kind, generous, and faithful. Someone who does not spend their life adding joy to those around them? Why? Why not them?

We want answers!

We want an explanation!

We want to make sense of this!

First let me put you at ease and say the church is **not** going to collapse in on us because we may be angry at God or because we are questioning God. No...we are in good company. God is used to this...

Read the book of Job-plenty of folks questioned God when Job was being (what looked like) picked on-"big time" by God. If you aren't familiar with Job, read the story in the Old Testament; that man was afflicted! Loss surrounded him like a blanket on a chilly night! (His livestock, his children, and his health were all taken from him.)

Job said, "Surely God has worn me out, he has shriveled me up, tore me in his wrath, hated me and gnashed his teeth at me, set me up as a target. My face is pure. Where is my hope?" At the end of 42 chapters of Job and his friends questioning God he says, "But now my eyes see thee (God)"!

Another great example is the Psalms. The psalmists are great at praising God but they also know how to question God and unleash anger at God: In one psalm, the psalmist actually threatens God and says in essence, "If you don't help me, I am going to find another God to worship!" Take that! Put 'em up..., "My God why have you forsaken me?" Why are you so far from my prayers and from helping me?

I cry but you do not answer-day and night I cry but find no rest.

The dogs and evil doers surround me.

I can count all my bones.

This goes on for 22 verses then he says, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord who delivers his people."

I share some of these verses with you to let you know we are *not* the first to question or to be angry with God or not to understand God.

Our God is big and God can take all of our feelings--the good, the bad and the ugly.

We are in a relationship with God and God wants us to be honest.

So I've been brutally honest with God this week...but then I got to thinking: the God I serve and preach about and share and teach about is a loving God--It just doesn't feel right to stay furious with God--I'm just so sad...I know that God did not cause Donna to have this aneurism. I believe that God's heart is breaking right along with ours.

I want to go back to the beginning of my sermon to what I did preach that summer of 1994 because it's just what I want to say today. I told you I wanted a different scripture to preach, I did not want to preach, "And we know that all things work for good for those who love God." But my curiosity got the best of me and I wondered what the really smart experienced preachers and scholars- (you know the ones who read and study the New Testament in its original language-Greek) Yeah-what do *those* scholars have to say about this scripture? I wish I had written the scholar's name down because I quote the person so often but I didn't have the presence of mind to do it. The scholar said in essence: "If we were to be given God's power for one week or even one day we would probably change a lot of things but if we were to be given God's wisdom along with God's power, we would change nothing!" Hmmmmm.

\*(read it again)\*

God's wisdom from above is not the same as our wisdom. God's knowledge is vast—All that we know or think we know is a tiny droplet in the vast ocean of God's knowledge. God's ways are much higher than our ways and we can comprehend only tiny shreds of God's comprehensive Master Plan.

Here I need to share another of our beloved parishioner's recently deceased (Arthur Johnson's) story again. On the Saturday that Arthur's wife of 58 years, Louise, died unexpectedly, I went to the hospital expecting to find him in a heap. Believe me I was in a heap myself. You see, Arthur had buried his son after a horrible battle with cancer and his brother whom he was close to and spent a lot of time with just a few months earlier.

Here's how I found Arthur-*Standing on the Promises of God*. He said, "Pastor, I sure don't understand what happened here but God is in control and he knows what he is doing" Then he quoted Job, "God though you slay me, yet will I trust you." What?

So where does all of this leave us?

If you are an inquiring mind like me, you may have a few questions.

Questions like:

Where does all of this leave us? And what do we do now?

Friends, I don't pretend to know anything about God's wisdom or will and to be truthful I get worried when folks say they know why God did or did not do something but there are quite a few things that I do know about God and I know what God would have us do now!

# 1. God loves us! So bask in God's love. So how much does God love us? God loves us so much that God sent his son Jesus, his only son, to live among us to teach us about his love and to die for our sake! That's a lotta love!!! John 3:16 God wants us to bask in his love.

I also know that

#2. God wants to be in a relationship with us and relationships work best when there is open and honest communication so God wants to hear from us in prayer.-so we can pray. God wants us to pray.

The Bible says, "Anyone who is having troubles should pray." James 5:13  
Abraham Lincoln said: "I've been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go."

Bringing our brokenness and troubles to God should be our first option, not our last resort.

God wants to hear how we feel.

God wants to be thanked for all the gifts God gives us.

We can ask God for wisdom and peace.

Remember we have a friend in a very high place who loves us and has a plan for our lives. The God who established the universe wants to establish your life's path, one day at a time, one step at a time.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13

I know that God wants us to:

#3. Strengthen and encourage one another-share in one another's sorrows and joys! "Be patient with each other's faults because of your love." Ephesians 4:2

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you!" Ephesians 4:32

I know that God wants us to

#4. Keep hope Alive

"God will help you overflow with hope in him through the Holy Spirit's power within you." Romans 15:13

"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint." Isaiah 40:31

I know that

#5. God wants us to believe and to know that God is near and God wants us to bask in God's presence. "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13:5  
God will walk beside us and not leave us or forsake us; God will hold our hand on the journey or carry us if need be (Remember the famous poem: *Footprints in the Sand?*)  
"Blessed be the Lord your God, who delights in you." Kings 10:9  
God wants us to bask in the love, light and warmth of his presence.

I know that

#6 God wants us to Trust Him and follow the plan God has for our lives. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his son Jesus Christ our Lord."  
1 Corinthians 1:9

I know that

#7. God wants us to Praise Him with prayers, worship and singing. "The Lord is watching his children, listening to their prayers." 1 Peter 3:12  
"Enter the gates with singing and praising, dancing and thanksgiving." Psalms

I know that

#8. God wants us to remember that this parting is not a permanent one.

As believers in Jesus Christ we have been promised eternal life. “Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God believe also in me, in my father’s house there are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am there you may be also. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.” John

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” Revelation 21:4

One day we will be united with our loved ones.

Heaven is a place of perfect happiness, friendship, worship, celebration and joy!

I know that

#9. God wants us to remember that those who mourn are blessed. “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5:4

Jesus knows what it is like to grieve. He wept at his friend Lazarus’ tomb. Jesus cares for those who are grieving and he will care for us.

I know that

#10. God wants us to be joyful.

Did you know that the baseline for being human is joy? “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer.” Romans 12:12

Let’s recap ten things we *can* do:

- Bask in God’s love for us
- Pray
- Encourage One Another
- Keep Hope Alive
- Bask In God’s Nearness and Presence
- Trust and follow God
- Praise God with worship and singing
- Celebrate Eternal Life
- Be blessed by God as we Mourn
- Be joyful

May God grant you peace and fill your heart with joy and Grace!

Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life and they may have it abundantly!

AMEN.