

There is a saying where I am from that gave me pause when I was younger. Now I am going to share it with you the way it's meant to be said. (I guarantee only Ann and Bill will understand it). But it would just be wrong of me not to say it in my Scot's tongue. I'll translate after.

The saying goes: "If its fur ye, it'll no go by ye." which means, "If a thing is meant for you, it won't pass you by."

It's a phrase that folks would turn too when things got overwhelming. The "it" it refers to might be something that someone was anxiously waiting for, something they wanted or needed – if its fur ye, it'll no go by ye – folks would say. When used like this, I suspect that folks were just trying to moderate expectations.

The saying was also frequently turned to in the face of disappointment, loss, or distress. The "it", in these cases, might be a job, a partner, a future dreamed of, but not realized - that thing a person had been waiting for that did, in fact, pass them by. Used like this, it was very well intentioned and meant as a statement of faith or an encouragement to resilience.

Sometimes as Christians we'll turn to phrases like this. God has a plan, we'll say. Or God won't give you more than you can handle. Yes, for sure, God is the divine center upon which everything is grounded, and we want so badly to help people hold on, to remember that there are held within a divine story of love and belonging. But when we offer words like this in this way to folks amid loss or anxiety, they may hear that God's plan directly involves their own heartache or disappointment. This can induce confusion or even feelings of shame or guilt. "Is God really indifferent or even so cruel that my suffering is integral to God's plans," they might ask?

Beloved, God does not will our suffering. Jesus wept over the loss we endure and had compassion and desired that those who are hurting are drawn into the support of beloved community. But suffering is real. We have free will and we act out of a self-interest that doesn't consider how our actions impact others. In our insecurities and skewed views of what we need to be well and whole, we can, and we do, do terrible things to each other and our environment and in the process, we create our own hell right here on earth.

And we have these bodies that were not meant to last forever. Bodies which in their infallibility, can and do let us down. And accidents happen. I don't know why we are not invincible, but we're not. We are not God. We are creatures who within the movement of time know suffering and weariness. There are plenty of things that I think should not be passed by people, but they do. This is what it is to be human.

So where then do we find God amid this reality? How do we make sense of God's plan for us? And how do we be with others during suffering in ways that offer God's comfort and hope.

As a seminary student I was lucky enough to be mentored by Rev. Craig Rennebohm – a chaplain who worked with those whose mental health significantly affected their well-being. I was talking with Craig one day about my own sense of call and how to live it out. Things were getting kind of hard, and I was wrestling with what it looked like to be faithful and how to live out who I was called to be and what I was being asked to do next. He looked at me kindly and seriously and said, “take your time, come alongside the goodness that is in you, that is calling you. Go gently and find some people to help you pay attention. Pay attention to the goodness in you, in the world, and in your spirituality from which God is calling you. This goodness will guide you. Look for it. It is a goodness that is true and if it's true, it will never go away.” he said. “If it is true, it will never go away.”

At first, I was distrusting of this phrase, - if it's true, it'll never go away - it sounded to me like that saying I had heard and held in suspicion as a child - if it's for you it won't go by you - when even as a child I could see that good things, necessary things, things that everyone should have, pass folks by all the time. But as I watched and saw Craig live out what he told me as he cared for others, I came to understand even that phrase from my childhood differently.

You see, Craig taught how to accompany others. He taught how to come alongside and sit with another, how to be with them exactly where they are at. He taught the power of sitting alongside another – not opposite them positioned in a almost confrontational way, ready to deliver sage advice or instruction - but rather beside them, side by side, connected, remembering our common humanity and looking out at the world together. Gently side by side, and over time, helping them just in our compassionate, attentive, consistent presence hold the hurt and discerning with them where they might over time

be able to grab onto the goodness that resides in them, in the world, in the Spirit that attends them.

I saw in this way of being together, that the suffering didn't disappear but there emerged in the darkest of places relationship and community and a reaching for goodness through which God was present to the suffering and lives were illuminated with dignity and meaning and beauty.

It's this goodness that God proclaims in Genesis 1. God created the world. This diverse, mysterious, world. A world full of humans with free will and a creation to care for and steward and God pronounced it good. A goodness that will not be undone.

There is a reason as I continued to learn from Craig that I committed myself to the Presbyterian church. In our polity – polity is a churchy word for describing how we organize as a church - in our polity we insist that as we give ourselves to this life together, we discern, and we make decisions together. While God's goodness will not be undone, while it is true and will never go away, we are a fallen people and will mis-hear what we think is the voice of God, and we will substitute our own will for God's.

So, in the presbyterian denomination we simply never go it alone. The pastor shares leadership with the session. The session and the deacons work together. The gifts of the people - and we are each gifted in diverse and wonderful ways - are collectively discerned and nurtured and honored. We make decisions regarding our way forward and the direction in which God is calling this body together. You and I are asked in this denomination to rely on each other, to pray together, to study together, to sit beside each other and carefully discern together. To look for the good and true together and help each other follow.

Now I want to add here an important insert about safety and about discomfort. Do not hear in all of this beloved that you personally are asked to sit beside and discern with everyone and anyone. I want us to hear this really clearly, while there is goodness in all of us there are situations that may not be safe for us. You are not asked to accompany someone, to sit beside some over time, and look for the good with someone who is unsafe for you. You can release that to God and trust that the body, the spirit of God in the world, will find other ways.

At the same time, as we take our own sense of safety seriously, we also need to help each other to engage in that which is actually just making us feel uncomfortable not unsafe.

It's a tricky distinction and we need to take it on carefully and honestly. Sometimes, we will experience discomfort because the good and true that is God's leading, God's work in the world will simply look different from what we expect or might threaten our own sense of place and even status.

Jesus tells his disciples this – take care with your rebuke. Anyone who is healing in my name – that is with love and compassion and faith in the love and goodness of God – is not against me just because they are not part of our fellowship.

And Jesus in the gospel from Mark issues a further strong warning to insiders – to those of us who claim the church of Jesus Christ as our home. He uses extreme language to get our attention and so we should be listening and heeding his word. We must not place a millstone around the neck of those who are starting to name and starting to follow God's goodness in them, and in the world they experience. And sometimes we do this, we dismiss new expressions of faith, of healing, of neighbor love, of reconciling movements, because these expressions challenge the way things have always been. Ours is a God who promises to always be about a new thing. We run the danger of quashing the growing faith of others when we insist that their way of seeing God must be wrong because it is asking us to stretch in how we understand God's action in the world.

Beloved there is a goodness in you and in the world that is true, and it will not go away. It has been there from the beginning of time. There is a goodness in this community of faith – I have heard about it as I start to hear your story and the legacy that is here. It is true and it will not go away.

As we center ourselves in this goodness, let us take time to discern together, to look together, for where God's goodness is calling us forth in new ways. As we do this, we will find even greater community - God-given, beloved community - that will bless us and be a blessing to others through all the up and downs of this real life.

Thanks be to God

Amen