

**Sunday, October 7, 2012**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Bad things happen to Good People”**

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When I graduated from college and was working in Washington DC, I wanted to do some type of volunteer work.

I signed up as a counselor for the Families and Children In Trouble 24 hour Hotline.

At the FACT hotline I was trained to answer calls from parents who were afraid that they were going to abuse their children or sometimes had already done so.

We were taught to listen to overwrought parents and offer support and referrals so that they might access appropriate forms of help.

As you can imagine we received all types of calls, each one more heartbreaking than the one before.

This was really my first encounter with evil in the world.

It was the first time that I came to understand the extent of hurt and pain in many families.

My next lesson came from a graduate school internship in the Children’s Sexual Assault Clinic at Children’s Hospital in Washington, D.C.

This was in 1982 and my job was to compile statistics, by hand – no computers – on the presenting problems of children coming into the clinic.

I spent seemingly endless hours in a windowless room reading charts and putting check marks on a tally sheet.

It was a somewhat remote way to learn about child sexual assault, by noting how many four-year olds had sexually transmitted diseases.

These two experiences led me to work in what we then called Battered Women’s Shelters.

Still living in Washington, I was hired as the Community Liaison person for a newly funded shelter in Prince George’s County Maryland.

Here I was able to meet, face-to-face, with the families I had been talking to on the hotline, and counting in the hospital.

In the shelter I had the opportunity to listen to women describe their experiences and their efforts to keep both their children and themselves safe.

These three experiences blended together to form a deep and lasting understanding that bad things happen to good people.

At the time, I was not part of a faith community – nor did I have any particular religious practice.

When I would ask women what they were doing to stay safe they would often tell me, “I pray.”

I would subconsciously roll my eyes and encourage them to take more active, concrete steps to keep themselves secure.

The women, however, from whom I learned more than I can ever recognize, continued to pray - as well as follow my steps.

I now know and understand that it takes both prayers and plans to deal with the hardships that life delivers.

Bad things happen. That is part of life.

In his book, *Preaching through a Storm*, Beecher Hicks says: "You're either coming out of a storm, in a storm or heading for a storm."

In the Old Testament reading this morning from the book of Job, we encounter one of the bible's most familiar characters.

Job – the man who had everything – wealth, family, friends and a deep love and reverence of God – is put to the test by Satan.

The last straw, the one that Satan is sure will turn Job away from God is the loss of his health.

Surely, Satan believes, and Job's wife suggests, that this list of calamities will turn him away from God.

But Job – bless his soul – stands strong.

He knows--he understands that God is with him throughout his hardship.

He asks, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

Poor Job goes on for 40 more chapters of hardship and lament.

His friends blame him for his situation but in the end his faith wins out and God restores his previous blessings.

Job's story is another example of biblical exaggeration to make a point. Or is it?

When you look at the news today, it does seem that some people suffer one calamity after another.

As I was reflecting on Jesus' teaching about divorce in today's reading, I was troubled by how to interpret this seemingly direct opposition to divorce.

Knowing that more than half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce and recognizing that many of you perhaps have experienced divorce, I was going to leave it alone.

But I have encouraged you to wrestle with difficult text – not to walk away from it – so I kept trying to figure it out.

What was Jesus thinking?

Didn't he realize all of the bad things that sometimes happen to people in marriage?

What about abuse, addiction, apathy, adultery?

All of a sudden, I realized that none of those things would occur in a marriage that was strictly following the teachings of Jesus.

In Jesus' world, the context would be different.

A man who opted to divorce his wife was essentially abandoning her.

Jesus calls the men to maintain their marital responsibilities and not simply cast aside their wives.

In the world where Jesus was prohibiting divorce, he was also calling for love as the preeminent way of life.

He advocated for peace, acceptance, joy and kindness in relationships.

No adultery, no violence, no lying, no violation of trust.

So the only reason for divorce in his context would be desire for change –which I can concur is not a good reason.

I can agree with Jesus that divorce in those circumstances is not acceptable, but that is also not our reality.

Marriage in our culture takes hard work – just as life takes hard work.

Maybe it is the old New England Yankee in me but I do believe that everything worthwhile takes hard work.

There is a great quote attributed to many people from Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Goldwyn that says, "The harder I work, the luckier I get."

I think that too often, we become enmeshed in our own problems- almost engulfed in the immediacy of what is going on.

We focus only on what is happening in the moment and lose sight of the larger picture.

Sometimes, when I am walking or particularly when I am hiking, I find myself looking down at the trail.

All of a sudden, something will prompt me to look up – and I am always surprised at how beautiful my surroundings are.

I remember helping people understand battered women’s decision making by describing how every decision, what to wear, what to cook for dinner, who to talk to, was colored by the fear of violence.

Last week the children and I talked a bit about the impact that hunger has on the rest of your life – everything you do will be tainted by the distraction of needing food.

It is in these times, when we are overwhelmed with worry, anxiety or fear that we must look up.

We must open our eyes, our minds and our hearts to allow God’s light to come in.

Scripture tells us that “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Jesus speaks about how faithfulness to God must be reflected in our treatment of others.

Our relationship with our spouses is not to be lightly discarded – even when it gets tough--but to be nurtured, sustained and honored.

The same is true for all relationships.

We must labor at being Christians.

When we remain faithful to Jesus, our relationships will enjoy the benefits and blessings of our faithfulness, and, in the healing and unity that our relationships bring, we will grow more faithful in touching the world with the grace and light of God.