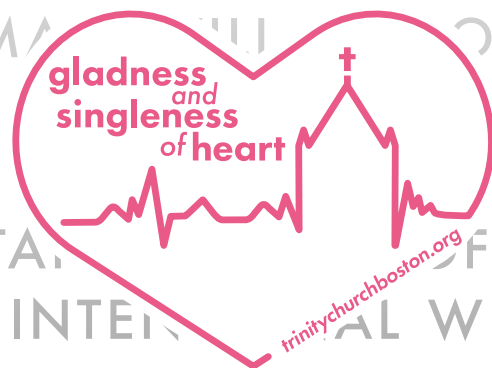


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HOLY WEEK

SERMON SERIES

The Will of God



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!"

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

On Palm Sunday we began our three-part, Holy Week sermon series on the “will of God,” mining the teachings of Leslie Weatherhead, Minister at London’s City Temple during World War II. Weatherhead divides God’s will into three categories:

the *intentional* will of God: God’s first design for the creation;
the *circumstantial* will of God: God’s purpose within the boundaries of a mortal moment; and
the *ultimate* will of God: God’s final desire for the creation’s fulfillment.

Sermon Series II: God’s Circumstantial Will

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
Maundy Thursday, April 6, 2023

Focusing on God’s intentional will, we resolved the theodicy dilemma – that defense of God’s goodness in the face of suffering – by *denying* “God is all-powerful:”

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

With this theological turn, we affirm God’s intentional will as life and Love, and we confirm that God *never* causes suffering – not for Jesus, not for anyone. Rather, God grants humankind a gift of freedom so full, so complete, that God self-limits the Divine power-to-control to share it. In turn, then, we receive the responsibility to choose our behavior, earning the consequences for good or for ill – not at God’s hand, but by our own. Through this understanding, we see that God did not hang Jesus at Golgotha, *we did* – a testimony to Jesus’ faithfulness and, sadly, our capacity for wickedness.

This evening we explore Jesus’ fidelity in those

circumstances that were not the will of God, but the “will of evil men,”² as Weatherhead describes Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and death. A presiding principle of this exploration:

because we recognize **God as the source and completion of all that exists;** and
because **God is always loving and good;**
therefore
God cannot create evil, and evil cannot create good.

Sharpening this postulate with tonight’s Gospel: Did God engineer Jesus’ crucifixion in order to convene the treasured Last Supper events? *Of*

course not. Rather, a terrible, entirely human conspiracy worked against God’s hopes for Jesus and his community: some who Jesus sought to love, chose to destroy him, and, according to the Creator’s gift of

freedom, God would not intervene, not even in that cruelty.

Weatherhead subdivides God’s “circumstantial will” into two parts, “one in the natural realm and the other in the spiritual.” He explains of the first: “The laws of the universe, which are themselves an expression of God’s will, were not set aside for Jesus, the beloved son. The laws which govern the hammering in of nails held on the day of Crucifixion in just the same way as they do when you [or I] nail up a wooden box. If bombs are dropped from an airplane over the closely built dwellings in a city, they pierce the roofs of the godly and of the ungodly [alike] ... The forces of nature carry out their functions and are not deflected when they are used by the forces of evil.”³

For Weatherhead, the “laws of the universe” – like a good Modern: physics, chemistry, biology, among others – express God’s intention. Therefore, Jesus’ horrible death on the cross *is* God’s will, inasmuch as the mechanics of hammers and nails, sun and

sword do not bend even for the Christ of God.⁴ This “natural-realm” component of God’s circumstantial will strongly affirms the ideas of God’s self-limiting and the fullness of humankind’s freedom.

Turning to this evening’s Gospel, Jesus’ recognition of the malevolence against him frames his washing of the disciples’ feet. At the outset of our reading from John, “The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray [Jesus]. And during supper, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands ... got up from the table ...”⁵

See, as evening approaches, Jesus already “knows his hour has come to depart from this world” – not because God has granted him a second sight to see into the future, but because he can sense the danger on the surface of his skin, feel it in the pit of his stomach when he realizes that one of his intimates has turned on him so grievously.⁶ Despite this heartbreak, Jesus finds strength in his faith: he recalls that he “had come from God and was going to God.”⁷ He does not take up arms against his aggressor. He does not run from what is coming. Instead, he “take[s] off his outer robe, [ties] a towel around himself[, pours] water into a basin, and [begins] to wash the disciples’ feet and wipe them [with the towel] tied around him ...”⁸

Again, did Judas Iscariot’s betrayal conceive Jesus’ tenderness and compassion for his friends? *Of course not.* These circumstances revealed the goodness already long at work in Jesus. Weatherhead agrees, writing of the horror in his day: “The war did not [invent] courage. [The war] *revealed* the courage that was there all the time ... Evil is never creative of good, though the circumstances of evil have [been occasions] for the expression of good[ness].”

Following the footwashing, our Lectionary leaps forward ten verses, past Jesus’ identification of Judas as his traitor. In the omitted section, the Evangelist recounts, “Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’”⁹ With their feet still drying, the disciples look across the table at one another, incredulous that a member of their fellowship could turn on their community after the moving experience they have just shared.¹⁰

At the urging of Peter, John¹¹ asks, “‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answers, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. [And after Judas] received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him,” the text reads.¹²

In the half-century that has passed since Matthew’s community authored the version of events we heard last weekend, the Johannine sect fits Judas’ betrayal within its own inherited cosmology – its conception of the universe’s origin, meaning, and trajectory¹³ – that imagines the earth as set between the warring realms of God and the angels, and Satan and his demons. According to this vision, God remains powerful, yet also under attack from a formidable foe, a constitutive evil crackling with corruption, disease, and destruction. God actively fights against this opposing force, violence for violence.

John’s narrative casts Judas as possessed, as trapped in Satan’s plot. Yet, Jesus says to Judas, “Do quickly what you are going to do,”¹⁴ and after Judas receives the bread – an unholy Communion – he “immediately went out.”¹⁵ The Evangelist concludes the awful affair, “And it was night.”¹⁶

Once more: was it God’s will that Jesus become an accomplice in the very conspiracy leading to his crucifixion? *Of course not.* Yet, in the narrowed confines of this terrible situation, Jesus’ acceptance becomes God’s *circumstantial* will, the highest road of life and Love still leading to the fulfillment of God’s *ultimate* will.

Weatherhead describes the character of Jesus’ consent as the “spiritual” component¹⁷ within the circumstantial will of God. He suggests, “Christ did not just submit to this dread event of the Crucifixion with what we miscall ‘resignation.’ He took hold of the situation. Given those circumstances which evil had produced, it was also God’s will that Jesus should not just die like a trapped animal, but that he should so react to evil, positively and creatively, as to wrest good out of evil circumstances.”¹⁸

Given that evil cannot create good, Jesus must respond “positively and creatively.”¹⁹ That is, God’s goodness must remain the source and the aim of Jesus’ action. “Taking hold of this situation,” Jesus

transforms the world's violence into God's grace by kneeling before those he loves, bathing their feet, and sharing their supper table. "In other words, [the] circumstantial will of God [can open] the way to God's ultimate triumph," and, as Weatherhead names of Jesus' singular fidelity, "that is why the Cross is not just a symbol of capital punishment [like] the hangman's rope, but is a symbol of [evil's redemption] in the cause of [God's] holy purposes."

Once Judas leaves, Jesus narrates his actions and their impacts, and he instructs the disciples: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him ... [Dear ones,] I am with you only a little longer ... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."²⁰

Within the extant cosmology, the battle between good and evil expected Jesus – if, in fact, God on earth – to meet violence with violence, demonstrating dominion and bridling the devil with the power-to-control. However, Jesus acts unwaveringly in accord with God's Loving nature and in alignment with God's final ambition, *no matter the circumstances*. With this constancy, Jesus not only disarms the threat to creation's fulfillment, he disembodies evil and inaugurates a new metaphysics. That is, in this new conception, evil no longer operates as God's tool for an inscrutable purpose, and evil no longer stands on its own as a formidable, opposing force. Likewise, God no longer expresses messiahship with the power-to-control, but with the power of Love! By this Love, God "conquers evil," and, by the same means, will soon "put death to flight."²¹ God does not change during the Crucifixion, rather, how we understand God shifts as we recognize evil as ephemeral, and God as eternal – as forever and always *good*.

Finally, while we receive this triumph of Love as the ultimate Good News, the events of Holy Week make clear that our righteousness does not promise earthly reward. As explanation, Weatherhead observes: "because of human folly and sin[;] because [humankind]'s free will creates circumstances of evil that cut across God's plans[; and] because of our oneness with the great human family;" others' evils

can create circumstances that "disturb" God's good purposes for us.²²

I suggest we reconceive "original sin" as *these disturbances*, rather than some curse of Adam and Eve into which all of us have been born. That is, let us understand "original sin" as our subjection to ills that we have not chosen for ourselves, as burdens imposed upon us by other *individual's* sins and the world's *collective* resistance to God's intentional will.²³ Only by this idea can I endorse the atonement claim that Jesus "died for our sins," for Jesus was not crucified as payment of a cosmic debt, but as the consequence of evil that was not his own.

Weatherhead summarizes: while God's intentional will includes a good purpose for every person, human shortcoming create the necessity for God's "circumstantial will." Yet, in the faithful honoring of its calling, the Christian soul can find peace in the promise that God's ultimate ambitions can still be accomplished through us – that how we live and who we are *matters*.²⁴ Tonight, we enter these Loving mysteries, washing one another's feet as Jesus did for those he loved, and loving one another through the new dawn soon to rise.

In singleness of heart, *Amen*.

Endnotes

- ¹ From Psalm 31.
- ² Weatherhead, Leslie. *The Will Of God*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1974, p. 28.
- ³ Weatherhead, p. 31.
- ⁴ Because God certainly did not establish “the laws which govern the hammering in of nails” for the express purpose of Christ’s Cross, I associate this “design” element more with the creative act and God’s intentional will. That is, the intentional will of these natural laws was for good, but humankind – not God – used them for evil.
- ⁵ John 13:2-3a, 4a.
- ⁶ John 13:1.
- ⁷ John 13:3b.
- ⁸ John 13:4b-5.
- ⁹ John 13:21.
- ¹⁰ John 13:22-23.
- ¹¹ The traditional identity of “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”
- ¹² John 13:24-27a.
- ¹³ In the theological context.
- ¹⁴ Despite this direction, the disciples do not sense what Jesus senses: “No one at the table knew why [Jesus] said this to [Judas]” (John 13:28). Therefore, “[s]ome thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival;’ [or ‘G]ive something to the poor”” (John 29-30).
- ¹⁵ John 13:30a.
- ¹⁶ John 13:30b.
- ¹⁷ The companion to the “natural” element noted earlier.
- ¹⁸ Weatherhead, p. 32.
- ¹⁹ In the company of the Holy Spirit, some experiences meant to tear us down (what we can name as “suffering”) can be remade into crucibles that build us up (what we can mark as “struggle”). As in (the considerably lower stakes of) an athlete’s workouts or a performer’s rehearsals, an academic’s studies or a professional’s practices, by redirecting our experience toward a higher purpose – achievement, beauty, service, in addition to God’s ambition – we can reclaim our circumstances as constructive.
- ²⁰ John 13:31, 33-35.
- ²¹ From the prayer “On Sunday,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 835.
- ²² Weatherhead, p. 30.
- ²³ Importantly, a collective in which we may share complicity, whether by our conscious choice or not.
- ²⁴ Ibid.



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Alleluia! Christ is Risen! *The Lord is risen, indeed!*
Alleluia!

A great wave swells, a distant star explodes, a new colt straightens its awkward legs and stands for the first time.

Some moments pull the universe taut, stretch the skin of our world thin enough to reveal more clearly the God beneath who bears it, the glorious One who dreamed and fashioned and enlivens all that

Sermon Series III: God's Ultimate Will

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
Easter Day, April 9, 2023

is. In these thin moments, the light of God blushes in the creation like a child who has swallowed a brilliant lamp, and as she plays and laughs and sings, from deep inside *she glows*. Light meets shadow in unexpected combination, and, with a rush, we see what we have not seen before. Sparkles catch our eye, and we wonder whether the flashes are tricks of the cornea or twitches of the cosmos.

And then there is Easter dawn – this glorious morning! – when blushing gives way to bursting. The earth quakes, the angel descends, and the stone rolls, the world's skin not stretched but *torn* – and not like a wound, but as a flower shoots. And shooting through, is *Love*.

The Rev. Leslie Weatherhead, Minister at London's City Temple during World War II, divided what he called "God's will" into three categories. Having now explored the first two of these divisions, today we conclude our Holy Week sermon series by taking up the third: God's *ultimate* will.

On Palm Sunday we focused on the *intentional* will of God, God's design for the creation. Reflecting on the Cross of Christ, we resolved the theodicy dilemma – that defense of God's goodness in the face of suffering – by proposing God self-limits the power-

to-control in support of humankind's freedom. With that theological solution, we affirmed God's first design as life and Love, and we confirmed that God *never* intends suffering – not for Jesus, not for anyone.

On Maundy Thursday we asked: did God engineer Jesus' crucifixion to convene the Last Supper's valedictory events? *Of course not*, we answered, and we pointed instead to the mortal conspiracy working against God's ideal desire for Jesus and his community. According to the Creator's gift

of freedom, God did not intervene in that evil scheme, and Jesus submitted himself to the imperial forces. Aimed for redemption, rather than resignation, Jesus transformed the world's violence into God's Grace by abiding God's *circumstantial* will: kneeling before those he loved and bathing their feet. Then,

gathering a supper with his friends and family, Jesus narrated what he had done, anticipated his fate, and purposed their community: "I am with you only a little longer ... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

On this Easter Sunday, we consider "the goal [God] reaches not only *in spite of* all [humankind] may do" to undermine God's intentions, but even "using that [evil] to further [God's] plan."¹ That is, in the Resurrection of Jesus, the force of God's ultimate will transforms the horror into hope; today, God turns death, into life! And, as Weatherhead names, "That is why the Cross is not just a symbol of capital punishment [like] the hangman's rope, but is a symbol of [evil's *redemption*] in the cause of [God's] holy purposes."²

He explains of God's *ultimate* will, "The picture in my mind is that of children playing beside a tiny stream that runs down a mountainside to join a river in the valley below. [The children] can divert the stream and get great fun out of damming it up with stones and earth. But not one of them ever succeeds in preventing the water from reaching the river at last. In regard to God, we are [these] children. Though we may divert and hinder [God's] purposes,

[we do not, cannot] ever *finally* defeat them ... and frequently our mistakes and sins [make] another channel to carry the water of God's plans to the river of his purpose."³

For any of us who have created an obstacle course for racing sticks along a rainy curb to the storm drain, or who have dug trenches in a beach's sand to redirect the tide, Weatherhead's image lands. No matter what we set in the water's path – stones or earth or even ourselves, laying our whole body in its way – the water *always* wins. Inevitably, all those tiny tributaries find their way to the greater "river of God's purpose."

Oh, Trinitarians! God has fashioned the world with Love, in Love, and for Love. Like the unseen, unceasing force of gravity, all the cosmos inclines toward a common fulfillment, every life's stream ultimately running toward a Loving relationship with God and all creation. Though we may contrive circumstances that interrupt God's intention – whether with those personal sins we tolerate as endemic to daily life, or by the collective wickedness that leads to Crucifixion – the triumph of Easter morning reassures us that God's ultimate will *shall still be accomplished*, no matter what.

Even so, be sure that the content and character of our lives remains consequential: consequential to God, consequential to ourselves, and consequential to one another. While Weatherhead keeps his ideas tethered to God's omnipotence with his language of God "using" evil to further God's "plan," I prefer we let loose of those notions more completely. Instead of "intentional will," let us choose language of *ideal design* to describe the order⁴ and purpose of God's creation; instead of "circumstantial will," let us choose *hopes* to describe the infinitely varied expressions of God's continuing engagement with the universe; and, instead of "ultimate will" or "plan," let us choose *ambition* to describe God's final desires – crucially, an ambition achieved not by God's compulsion, but by our fidelity.

A brief word about God's hopes: by God's self-limiting the Divine power-to-control in service of our freedom, I do not at all mean that God's Love for the creation has atrophied into indolence. Rather, God *hopes* life and Love for all people, in

every circumstance. Like the synergistic joy of a gleeful crowd lifting a team or a performer (their feet scarcely touching the ground), so God *actively* "cheers" life and Love for us. Indeed, God empowers the Holy Spirit to inspire in us and among us more than what we could achieve alone, more than we could "ask or imagine."⁵

Attendantly, our falling short of God's hopes grieves God. God will not punish us for those shortcomings – again, the God who is all goodness cannot, will not commit such evil. Rather, God grieves *that we punish ourselves*, that we hurt those with whom we share our lives.

For while living contrary to the sum of all God's hopes – God's *ambition* that all people and all the cosmos are restored to Loving relationship with God and with one another – while living contrary to God's ambitions may ultimately prove futile, such contrarianism is not irrelevant to the quality of our lives and the life of the world.⁶ God has made us for the joys of Easter Sunday! Let us not choose for ourselves or impose upon others the miseries of Good Friday.

God's ideal design;
God's (circumstantial) hopes;
God's (ultimate) ambition.

What difference do these ideas make?

With little effort, I can believe that the son of a Nazarene carpenter was tortured to death by the state and buried in a cave by his followers – but I do not understand the mechanics of how, three days later, he came back to life. I suppose because of my inability to apprehend that mystery, if I had been asked some years ago whether I believed "in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus," I likely would have answered, meekly, "No." Maybe some of you share or have shared that skepticism (if not my embarrassment) about this most challenging claim of our faith. If so, do not lose heart; the Body of Christ makes room for wonder and doubt, what the Gospels mark as "amazement."⁷ Remember: the first women at the empty tomb were afraid, and even Jesus' closest disciples did not immediately believe.⁸

Nonetheless, if it might strengthen just one spirit, I

will share that between then and now, something has shifted in me. I still do not understand how the gears of Resurrection turn, of course, and I continue to wrestle the historicity of the Gospel accounts ... but I have come to believe the truth of their testimonies. I believe that something singular between God and the cosmos happened in that moment – on this glorious morning! – and we understand that event as this man, Jesus, raised from the dead. By this mystery, God recreated the universe, a moment unlike any since the creation itself, and unlike any since.

Just as in the first Genesis story God imbues the creation with the capacity to create⁹ [in an Epiphany-season Forum, we described this as God “creating creationally”], in the Resurrection of Jesus, God imbues the creation with the capacity to renew, to resurrect [God “redeems redemptively,” we might say]. And as the creation’s creativity reveals the *imago dei*, that image of God the Creator wrought in the fibers of the cosmos from the beginning, so, too, resurrection has been stitched into our being, and by our undertaking new life – forbearing, forgiving, repairing, reconciling – we witness the *imago Christi*, the very image of the resurrected Christ.

If any of this sounds like a subtle hedge, I do not mean it to be; if asked today whether I believe “in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” I would say, “Yes.” The conviction is still not facile for me – I must labor to believe it, choose to believe it. Yet I *do* choose, I *do* believe ... and I hope that you might believe it, too.

Friends, the welfare of our world depends upon Easter, and I hope that we might enter its mystery together. I hope that might join with one another in this Beloved Community of Trinity Church – choosing God as God has chosen us, loving one another as God loves us all. And in the company of the Holy Spirit, I hope that we might dare dream of that moment when blushing gives way to bursting; when faith gives way to fulfillment; when the earth finally become as heaven is, where there is no death, neither sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting.¹⁰

For, Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

In gladness and singleness of heart, I pray;
Amen.

Endnotes

- ¹ Weatherhead, pp. 48-49.
- ² Weatherhead, Leslie. *The Will Of God*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1974, p. 32.
- ³ Weatherhead, pp. 49-50.
- ⁴ By “order” I mean what Weatherhead describes as “the laws of the universe, which are themselves an expression of God’s will” (p. 31).
- ⁵ Ephesians 3:20.
- ⁶ I draw this use of the word “futile” from *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland (Harper Collins, 2003). They write, “In this life, many choose their own hell, and, even more terribly, many make a hell for others, and in this way the decision to live a life outside of God’s blessing is not irrelevant. But I believe it is futile” (p. 115).
- ⁷ From the original ending of Mark’s Gospel: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).
- ⁸ Maybe most conspicuously in Luke’s account: “they return[ed] from the tomb they told all this to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (24:8-11).
- ⁹ From that January lecture: “Likewise, God creates *creationally*, and by that I mean God creates a creation that creates ... God creates ‘seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.’ That lone detail of ‘seed-bearing’ plants, trees, and fruit highlights that even the earth’s vegetation shares in the Divine power of creation.” God’s commission to the animals and humankind to “be fruitful and multiply” follows (Genesis 1:20-28).
- ¹⁰ Adapted from “The Burial of the Dead, Rite I,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), pp. 492-483. “The Commendation’s refrain is: “Where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.”

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Community Breakfast

First Sunday of the Month, 9 am, Commons & Forum

Did you know that Trinity hosts a Community Breakfast, generally held on the first Sunday of each month? Enjoy a hot breakfast downstairs in Trinity's Undercroft between the morning services. All are welcome!



LEARNING

Formation for All Ages

Sundays, 11:15 am

At Trinity Church Boston, all of us—committed Christians as well as those just beginning to explore—are pilgrims on the way. We offer formation opportunities for learners across the life spectrum. From our youngest in the Nursery to those who are more “experienced learners”—Trinity welcomes all to explore and grow in their faith journey.



To learn more about **Children's Ministries**, for infants through children in fifth grade, contact Cathy Portlock Pacitto, cportlock@trinitychurchboston.org.

To learn more about **Youth Ministry**, for those in sixth grade through high school, contact Beth Folsom, bfolsom@trinitychurchboston.org.

To learn more about **Adult Formation**, visit trinitychurchboston.org

MUSIC

Join the Choristers

Do you know a child aged 7-10 who might be interested in singing? The Chorister program at Trinity Church offers an extraordinary opportunity to learn music, singing, leadership, teamwork, responsibility, commitment, have fun, and to see the world! Choristers learn about the faith and engage in the life of the church through their active leadership of worship. Parents often say that the Chorister program is a deeply transformative experience for their children.



To learn more about the Chorister program please email Colin Lynch, Director of Music at clynch@trinitychurchboston.org.

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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