

“A Blessing in Disguise”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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It is quite evident from our Story for All Ages for this morning that there has been an awareness of the concept that is at the core of the idiom, a blessing in disguise, for a very long time. And yet, when I looked up the history of the phrase, I learned that it first appeared in print in 1746. James Hervey, an English clergy person, included the phrase “blessings in disguise” in a hymn he wrote titled “Since All the Downward Tracks of Time.”

I find the lag between when people had an awareness of the concept that is at the heart of the idiom, and when the idiom was first written, to be very interesting. The lag I just mentioned seems similar to what occurs when a blessing eventually arises as a result of some situation or event that initially seemed to have little or even no positive benefit. In such situations, it takes time for the blessing to emerge and become apparent, or for us to become aware of the benefit that we have received. What, at first glance, might seem to be a detrimental situation or event, may later be perceived from a very different perspective when we recognize something positive that arose as a result.

As we heard in the Story for All Ages, on three separate occasions the townspeople came to offer condolences for something that occurred which they viewed as a significant hardship for the farmer. In each situation, after some time had passed, what initially seemed to be a hardship turned out to be, as the idiom states, a blessing in disguise. After the townspeople recognized the positive outcome of each situation, they would return to the farmer to express their gladness for the benefit that was the result of the seeming hardship. Each time the townspeople would come, whether with condolences or congratulations, the old farmer would offer the same response; “Who knows? We shall see.” Each time I hear or read this ancient tale, I marvel at the wisdom it contains. And each time I hear or read this ancient tale, I am reminded of times when I would have benefitted from practicing the wisdom the old farmer displayed.

When I reread this tale in planning for today’s service, I was reminded of a situation that began just over three years ago where I could have benefitted from recalling the wisdom of the old farmer. The situation involved my mother. She was 94 at the time and still living in the large, 19th century home my family moved into when I was 6 years old. For quite a few years my mother has had a medical condition that makes her susceptible to urinary tract infections or UTI’s. And sometimes when an infection sets in, it can quickly become quite serious. In this instance, within a very short period of time the infection reached a point where her doctor decided she needed to be hospitalized. At the hospital she was connected to all sorts of equipment that monitored her vital signs continually. I was very concerned for her when I learned she had been hospitalized because the level and intensity of the infection had reached the point where it posed a considerable threat to her life. As it turned out, the infection wasn’t the only threat to her life at that time.

One night while she was in the hospital she was awakened by a number of medical staff who came rushing into her room with what she later learned was a defibrillator. My mother awakened with a start and asked them why they were all in her room. They informed her that her heart had stopped beating and they had come to restart it and prevent her from dying. This, of course, startled my mother. She had no awareness of any heartbeat irregularities.

The monitor she was connected to clearly indicated that her heart had stopped for a length of time that was life threatening. A heart specialist was consulted and after reviewing the available information, my mother was told that she needed to have a cardiac pacing device, or pacemaker, implanted. She was informed that without a pacemaker, her heart could stop beating at any moment. She was also told it was very likely that at some point in the not-too-distant future her heart would stop beating and wouldn’t restart on its own. If that was to occur, she would be dead in a matter of minutes. Soon after getting that information, and before making a decision about the pacemaker, she spoke with her children about the decision she was faced with.

After a few days of intravenous antibiotics, my mother's UTI was under control and she was transferred to a much larger hospital where she would undergo surgery to have a pacemaker implanted. Less than 36 hours after the surgery she was released from the hospital to return home. My sisters and I were all relieved that my mother's UTI was no longer a threat to her life. We were also relieved that an even more serious threat had been discovered and a medical intervention had been done that would quite probably extend her life. At that point we thought the issues involving our mother's health and wellbeing had been addressed, at least for a while.

Well, that while was much shorter than we thought or hoped it would be. Within two days she was struggling to breathe. Her doctor made a very rare home visit and called an ambulance after checking her vital signs. She was readmitted to the hospital where the pacemaker operation had been done. This time the admission was to address a collapsed lung. It took several days after the lung was re-inflated for the doctors to feel comfortable with releasing her. But this time they said she couldn't return home. She was too depleted from what she had been through to adequately care for herself in her own home. Before the UTI, the pacemaker surgery and the collapsed lung, it had been very hard for her to get into and out of the house since she had to go up and down steps. And in the house, the doorways of the bathroom were so small that getting through them with her walker was very challenging on a day when she had good energy and stamina. Instead of going home, she went to a residential rehabilitation facility where she received physical therapy, occupational therapy and her medical needs could be monitored and addressed as needed.

Eventually it became apparent that my mother wouldn't be able to go back to live in the house that had been her home for more than 60 years. This was yet another unwanted situation that had to be faced and coped with. There were few options available since my mother had always vowed that she would never live with one of her children. She had both her mother and her mother-in-law live with our family for periods of time in their later years and she knew all too well how difficult that can be for everyone involved. My mother agreed that she needed to go into a nursing home. As it turned out, a room came open within a few weeks at the best nursing home in the area. This was the same nursing home my father had been in up until his death. My mother knew the facility and had seen how the staff cared for my father and the other residents. And the nursing home was able to provide the rehabilitation services that my mother needed. It wasn't long before she was able to move out of the rehabilitation facility and into the nursing home. She hadn't wanted to live in a nursing home but that was her only reasonable option. At that point my mother perceived being in a nursing home to be an unwanted and unpleasant necessity.

Less than a year after my mother moved into the nursing home, the COVID pandemic arrived. Had she still been in her home, she would have been very isolated. She would have had difficulty getting the medical care she needed. And prior to vaccines being available, she quite possibly could have contracted COVID from my sister and brother-in-law who would have been bringing her groceries and checking in on her regularly. In the nursing home she has contact with people every day. She gets three meals a day. She gets the medical care she needs. And she isn't responsible for maintaining a home or paying bills. She has even been able to have video calls with relatives, something that wouldn't have been possible if she was living in her home.

What I have shared with you about my mother is a real life example of blessings in disguise. And like in the Story for All Ages, when the adversities would first occur none of my family members had any idea that significant positive outcomes would arise from the adversities that occurred. It was only after time had passed that we could recognize the blessing or blessings that were eventually a result of each adversity. In phone or video calls I have with my mother, we often discuss one or more of the adversities and subsequent blessings that came about as a result. We talk about how adversities sometimes lead to unexpected and positive outcomes.

I am certain that all of us have our own stories about some situation in our lives that we initially experienced as adverse or detrimental—situations which turned out to have a positive outcome that we couldn't have predicted and didn't expect. It is good, and I would say it is important, to recall such situations often. It is good and important because recalling such stories can provide us with many gifts as we go through life. For example, remembering such stories keeps fresh in our minds that things aren't always as they seem.

Remembering such stories reminds us that we need to continually be curious about, and open to, what the future may hold for us. Being curious about and open to the future can be a significant challenge when some adversity makes the current moment seem like the only time that exists. And I would suggest that remembering such stories can help us recognize that there may be other past situations of adversity that resulted in some blessing or blessings we haven't yet recognized. Realizing that things are not always as they appear, being curious about and open to the future, and continuing to look for blessings that are the result of some difficult situation are resources we can call on when adversity shows up yet again in our lives, which it most certainly will.

With the thought that adversity will be a visitor at some point in our future, I want us to again hear the poem by Rumi that Lisa shared with us.

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Like our Story for All Ages this morning, there is great wisdom in Rumi's poem. Wisdom that hopefully we can call on and draw from when adversity comes to visit.

With the idea of the guest house and visits in mind, I share one more aspect of the story about my mother. Recently my mother was able to take a drive by the house she had to move out of in 2019. A family has purchased and is living in the house now. In a call I had with my mother last week she shared that one of the things that caught her attention upon seeing the house for the first time in more than three years was the swing set in the yard. Seeing the swing set reminded her of how, when my sisters and I were young, neighborhood children were frequently at our house and in the yard. Seeing the swing set brought memories flooding back, memories of good times. Toward the end of our call she told me she hoped our old house would provide as many good times for the family currently living there as we had. She went on to say she hoped the family living there now will be able to remember those good times for as long as they live, just like she is able to recall the good memories from her years in the home.

Her sharing this touched me deeply. I was touched because despite the adversity of having to leave her home, my mother was able to identify, in a very positive way, with the family who now lives in what was her home. She was able to express hope and good wishes for them. And she was able to recognize the blessing

that her leaving the home has provided her and is now offering to another family. Her sharing reminded me that it is important to continually look for the blessings in disguise that I may not yet recognize.

My wish for all of us is that we will seek and find the blessings that may be hidden in situations that might seem to involve nothing but adversity. When you discover those blessings, may you carry them in your mind, in your heart and in your open outstretched hands as you share the blessings you have received with those you meet on your journey of life.

So may it be.