

My daughter-in-law is very fond of saying, "Oh, this was meant to be!" And every time I hear her say that I do an inward cringe. "Really," I think, Do you think God has planned every last event down to your weekend plans? Or to find you a parking space?

And then I immediately jump to the not so happy things that have happened to me and others I know. Were those things meant to be? It is true that much evil and suffering exists in our lives through our own agency, and much not by our own doing, but did God **mean** for all that to happen? The shooting in Uvalde, Texas?

I have spent a good deal of time in my life with friends who are Sufis. A Sufi is a Muslim who takes a vow to follow a path to find God in this life. They are serious like monks, but live out in the world. I first met them while Jonathan and I were living in Egypt some 45 years ago. While I never could see myself becoming a Sufi, I found much of their spirituality profound, though not this point in particular. When we lived there, we very often heard people say in response to a question such as, "Are you coming tomorrow?" the answer being "In Shah Allah" which means if God will it. We, as good American Protestants just thought this was a classic form of evasion. Well, maybe, depending on which way the wind blows. But in fact, that is not at all where they were coming from. In Islam there is one God. And Allah is indivisible. He and His Will are indivisible. All is His Will, All is exactly as it was made and as it should be. So to say, "In Shah Allah, I will come tomorrow really meant that if it is already written in the reality that God made, it will happen. If not, it won't, which meant nobody knows.

In a quote from Cemalhur Sargut, a modern living female Sufi master, she says, "Everything inscribed in the Preserved Tablet (ie what has already been created and mandated,) will become manifest. In this regard, people do not make choices: they are not free. Whatever is written in the heavenly spheres and stars is God's decree. "

This way of looking at life has its obvious comforts. It would be nice to feel certain that all was in place as it should be and we needn't be worried about making choices or about change.

But this is different from most Christian thinking. While there is the doctrine of predestination, but most Christians believe that we have some element of free will.

I believe we live in a world where everything is not ideal or worked out ahead of time. Many of the things that happen to us are of our own making and many are not. But God gave us intelligence and a free will to interact in this fallen world and what happens in it.

What would be the point of our intelligence if life were all mapped and planned out? Does God want us to be automatons?

I do not believe we are puppets in an already written show, it does matter who we are at any given moment, and what is in our thoughts and hearts.

I quote St Sophrony, a twentieth century Russian Orthodox saint from his book, "His Life Is Mine", "In making us in His image, after His Likeness, God placed us before Him not as an action entirely subject to Him, but as free beings." That free will can be used to do anything we want in life. Go in any direction and reject God all we want. But it can also be used to bring ourselves back to Him. He wants our love above all things. And the nature of love is so special because it is a freely given gift. In fact love is not love if it is not a freely given.

Let us look at human relationships to understand this more: Who would want a friend if he were assigned to us? How could you trust such a person? What does trust consist of? Mutual caring.

Who would want a child who had no desire to love you? And wouldn't want to be like you, at least in their early years!

What could be more profound than any human being, saying to you, I choose to love you, I choose to interact with you, I come to you of my own free will and want to be with you.

Why would God want any less from us? Because we live in a world that allows us to make choices, we can offer the most precious gift of freely given love.

We do live in a fallen world. There is the element of luck, good or bad fortune. Unless you choose to believe that all is written in the Preserved Tablet. We have to acknowledge that chance and uncertainty are in our world. Maybe I can't believe in a God who preplans everything but is that really so much worse than a God who allows such bad things to happen by chance? Would it be easier to face the things that

happen if I felt God had planned it and was asking me to bear them for His Sake? Probably so. Many times I have asked God, "Do you want me to walk this path or is this just bad luck? How do you trust a God who allows pain?"

Looking back over the difficult things that have happened in my life, I can see that in spite of bad fortune, evil, or just events, good does prevail if we work for it. God's promise to us is that He does not control us, but He is at every moment, in the reality of the present, He is there to work with us, if we ask Him. To heal, to bring resurrected new life. "I am with you even to the close of the age"

But even though we have free will we are not in control either. Free will does not give us the control or even the understanding over events

I often think of a Sufi story, one that I do think has profound wisdom. Its called the Chinese horse.

A very old poor Chinese grandfather lived with his young grandson. They were very poor. One day the boy goes out in the field to work and the old horse dies. The boy goes running in to his grandfather and cries, "Grandfather, Grandfather, we are ruined, the horse has died." The old man bows his head and says quietly, "maybe good, maybe bad" The next day the boy goes out into the field and spies on the horizon a herd of young wild stallions He is able to capture a few and bring them back. He runs in to the grandfather and says, "Grandfather, Grandfather, we are rich! We have new horses! The old man bows his head and says, "Maybe good, maybe bad". The next day the boy goes out and gets up on one of the wild stallions and falls off and breaks his leg. He goes into the grandfather and says, "Grandfather, we are ruined, I can't work the fields." The old man bows his head and says, Maybe good, maybe bad. The next day, the Chinese army rides into town and conscripts all the young fit boys and takes them away.

You see how this goes, how we don't see the whole picture at any given time. We are not in control, even if we think we are.

So I have faced many days asking myself each day as I look at the particular events, "How do I go on, how do I live this day in uncertainty. How do I live if its not all planned out? How do I trust God when there often seems nothing concrete to stand on? I think of 1Corinthians 13, Now abideth Faith Hope and Love. It didn't say

certainty. It is faith that God is ultimately good, hope for the best that what is good in life will win out, hope for God's blessings to become real and love. Love first of all for God and love for everything thing I can find in this world to love. Those are the things that help me pick up each day and go forward, not any sense of certainty.

The point of interaction between my freely given love and God's being with me has been prayer. I spend time with God, even if I come away feeling like I am not sure He was there. Its possible that our prayers can get God to change what happens, that's called a miracle, I suppose. What is more certain is that our prayers and interaction with God change us, so we can change what happens here in this world. And in the loving relationship that changes us we become His creation, we become more like Him, we become what has always been meant to be.