

SERMON TITLE: “A Pattern of Mercy”

TEXT: Isaiah 65:17-25

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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Today’s message is going to be the last sermon on Isaiah for a while. Next week, my brother Gil is going to be here and the week after that Kathleen Busch, the pastor from our sister MB church in Victoria, is going to be bringing the message (Kathleen was actually born and raised in Nanaimo, so this will be a kind of homecoming for her). So because we’re going to be leaving Isaiah for a short time, I thought I would go to the end of the book and look at a kind of “big picture” passage.

Today, we’re going to talk a bit about patterns.

CAVEMAN LOGIC

This week, there was an article in one of our national newspapers that caught my attention. The article was reviewing a book called “Caveman Logic” by a professor at the University of Guelph. This book analyzes our tendency to use phrases such as “it was my good luck” or “I guess everything happens for a reason” or “it was meant to be.” Or “thank God.” We all hear these kinds of phrases and many of us use them, whether consciously or subconsciously (Just last night on Sportscentre, the journalist ended her story of the BC Lions loss with the words, “they came back hard but it just wasn’t meant to be”).

The author of the book being reviewed in the article argued that these are examples of “the persistence of primitive thinking in the modern world.” Just as our ancestors used to attribute thunderstorms, earthquakes, and hurricanes to the displeasure of God or the gods, so they also tended to see reasons for the less spectacular things that happened in daily life. So they chalked everything up to either some form of “superstition” or divine reason. Nothing could be considered random because that would be to open the door to chaos and our brains don’t like chaos. According to the article, this accounts for our propensity to identify “patterns or “streaks” that, in reality, do not exist.”

What we need to realize in order to come out of the cave (according to the author) is that there is no purpose or reason behind the events of our ordinary lives. We know that random things happen all the time—both good and bad. All smart, rational people know that life on this planet is just the more or less haphazard result of a whole bunch of molecules bumping into each other with no pattern or reason or meaning or “luck” behind it all. Not surprisingly, Harris is an atheist, and he offers this rather bleak assessment of our predicament:

“I would be more optimistic about our species’ chances for survival if pseudoscience, organized religion, and a host of other delusions were voluntarily taken off the table,” says Prof. Davis... We need to see our defective Stone Age minds for what they are if we ever hope to drag ourselves, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century.

Well, that’s not a very pretty picture is it? I’ve read a lot of these kinds of arguments over the last few years but I have to say, I still bristle when I come across the claim that religious people are “cavemen” who prefer superstition to reason. The term “caveman” is not exactly a flattering one!

After all, as Christians we are fairly committed to the belief that the author in this article is fundamentally in error—that when we say “it was meant to be” or “thank God” we actually believe that God is working behind the scenes for a specific purpose, and that the events of our world and the events of our lives are part of a fairly significant pattern.

Now there are some very good (and obvious) reasons why I think that Mr. Harris is simply mistaken here. But this is not the place for a lecture on apologetics or a detailed rational critique of atheism (much as I would be happy to talk about this with you).

But even if you’re not interested in debating atheists or ruthlessly analyzing everyday phrases, I think that most of us can think of someone—whether a sibling, a parent, a co-worker, or a friend—who thinks that Christianity or religion in general is a superstitious waste of time. We need to be open to having conversations about this.

Are we crazy to look for patterns in life? Are we superstitious and irrational to try to find purpose and meaning in everyday events?

PATTERN-SEEKERS

As human beings, we are pattern-seekers. We do this on two levels:

1. pattern as in regularity

Kids learn to identify patterns in school. It’s neat to watch the light bulbs go off when they learn to count by 2’s, 5’s, 10’s, and how math works according to regular, predictable rules.

We also teach our kids proper behaviour this way. They learn, for example, that shooting a hockey ball against a window or destroying your sibling’s toys will produce one kind of a reaction. Saying please and thank you and being respectful and considerate of others will produce another reaction (at least it should!). Kids learn that certain causes produce certain effects. There is a pattern to how things

work in their life that they need to live according to in order to get the desirable effects.

This isn't just the case for kids. We also train ourselves according to patterns. Naomi works for Weight Watchers part time and she sees this all the time. The pattern is very obvious: eat smaller portions, record how much you eat, and become more active and the weight comes off. Don't do these things, and the weight stays on.

The same is true of a wide variety of activities in our lives. There is a way things work that is predictable, orderly and rule-bound and we have to recognize this and act accordingly if we want to obtain our goals.

2. pattern as an overall purpose or goal of life

This understanding of patterns is a bit different, and a bit subtler but I think it is still very real. We look for meaning and purpose in the events of our lives. We try to connect the dots in relationships—we wonder if so-and-so is “right for us”; we pick careers according to whether or not this job matches my skills and gifts; we structure our “free time” in ways that preserve balance in our lives; we try to become involved in our communities because we understand that our well-being is tied up in the well-being of others.

When things are going well for us we try to understand what we're doing right to keep things going as we want them to. When things are going poorly for us, we wonder what needs to change, what we're doing wrong, if we're sinning or displeasing God somehow. We look for new techniques, new insights and strategies to implement in order to turn things around.

In all this we assume that there is a general pattern for how our lives should be going. It might not be as predictable and rule-bound as counting by 5's, but we tend to look at the choices we make—from everyday struggles with our jobs and our kids to major health problems or financial crises—in terms of an overall blueprint or picture of what makes a good life.

We operate *as if there is a way that life ought to be lived in order to produce the desired results*. We understand that there are ways of living that “work” better than others, for us and for those around us, even if we don't always live accordingly.

We need patterns, and we see patterns in Isaiah.

GOD'S PATTERN FOR LIVING

One of the things that we've discovered throughout our series on this complex book is that Isaiah is absolutely convinced there *are* patterns and reasons for things that

happen—whether on a cosmic scale or in the life of the nation of Israel or in our own individual lives.

One thing that the prophets consistently do is lay things out in their starkest form: disobedience leads to judgment; obedience leads to blessing. Simple as that.

Right at the beginning of this sermon series, James drew our attention to the phrase: “Come, let us reason together.” It is a picture of God pleading with his people to think carefully about how they are living, the patterns they are seeing (or failing to see) in the world he has made.

God is appealing to his people to *think* about what they are doing because it isn’t fitting the pattern that he has in mind! The pattern was initiated way back in the book of Genesis, chapter 12: God blessed Israel to be a blessing to the nations.

Part of what it means to “be a blessing” is spelled out in Isaiah. In 58:6-8 he says this:

*"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?"*

*7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*

*8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.*

This pattern echoes throughout the OT and becomes even more focused in the life and teaching of Jesus. In Matthew 22:35-39 we read:

³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:
³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷Jesus replied: "
'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all
your mind.'³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is
like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on
these two commandments."

Later on, in the writings of Paul, we see another expression of the pattern in Galatians 5:22-23:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

All of these passages point to God's pattern for life, but in Isaiah's day, it was not happening. Over and over again God uses Isaiah to show his people that calamity is coming because of their failure to follow God's commands; their failure to pursue justice and mercy, their idolatry and rebellion despite God's repeated attempts to call them back. We saw this in James' message about the vineyard: God expected fruit, but his people were not producing what he desired. They weren't living according to the pattern.

GOD'S PATTERN OF MERCY

Just like kids learn that certain causes produce certain effects and, ideally, adjust their behaviour accordingly, so Israel was meant to see that there were consequences to disobeying God. The pattern for life was there for a reason.

But there is also another pattern in Scripture. And this is the pattern that (finally!) brings us to this morning's text. Isaiah: 65:17-25:

*17 "See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.*

*18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.*

*19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.*

*20 "Never again will there be in it
infants who live but a few days,
or older people who do not live out their years;
those who die at a hundred
will be thought mere youths;
those who fail to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.*

21 *They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

22 *No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.*

23 *They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.*

24 *Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.*

25 *The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"
says the LORD.*

This is the big pattern. This is the end result for God. Everything that happens in our world, everything that happens in your life and my life, takes place under the overarching pattern of this new creation that Isaiah speaks of here. This is the purpose and the goal of human life—to live at peace and in harmony with God, with one another, with creation.

It is *a pattern of mercy*, a pattern that shows God taking the initiative in our lives, a pattern that reveals a God whose plan for blessing and redemption goes on even when we are unaware of it. Even when we aren't looking for it. Even when we don't want anything to do with it:

Isaiah 65:1-2:

"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'

Isaiah 65:24:

Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.

This idea of God seeking us before we look for him is in the NT as well.

1 John 4:19:

We love because he first loved us.

Romans 5:6-8

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The ultimate pattern that God has for the world, and for us, is love. It is mercy. This is what causes God to call out to a people who aren't even seeking him. This is what makes God promise to usher in a new creation where we will walk so closely with him that he will answer us before we even call out to him.

This pattern holds true no matter what our circumstances are like. Whether we are struggling and suffering or whether we are experiencing blessing and delight, we know that God's love for us is not based upon anything we have done to earn it. It's not something that is based upon how close to the pattern we are.

Of course we are still to try to live according to God's pattern—there are consequences for our actions, both good and bad. We need to hear this. God does hold us accountable. To say that God's ultimate pattern is one of love and mercy is not to say that we can just live however we want because God will forgive us. God will forgive, but he expects us to repent and turn away from our sin and toward him.

But our actions are not the basis for God's love and mercy. The basis for this is simply God's character. God is love. God is merciful. Period.

And because of who he is, God loves us too much to leave us alone. He does not want us to destroy ourselves. He desperately wants you and me to recognize the pattern for human life—his son, Jesus Christ—and to love and obey him, through the peaks and valleys of life.

LOOKING FOR PURPOSE IN A FALLEN WORLD

Does this mean that if we do our best to follow God's pattern the meaning and purpose behind every event in our lives and in the lives of those we love will be instantly clear? Will the mystery of evil and suffering instantly fit into a nice orderly plan if we are doing our best to live as God asks us to?

No. Just like in the days Isaiah was writing, there will continue to be things that God's people don't understand. There will be things that we see and things that we

experience that don't seem to fit any kind of an obvious pattern, that don't nicely slot into an orderly plan of goodness and blessing.

Sometimes pain and suffering are part of God's plan to bless us; sometimes they are just tragedies—events that break God's heart as well as ours. And we won't always know which is the case when we're in the middle of it.

The world we live in is being redeemed, but it is not yet as it will be. The ultimate pattern is a future reality that we do our best to live out in the present, but which we will never fully attain.

So are we using “caveman logic” when we pray and struggle and strain to hear God's voice, to see his plan, to discern his purposes amidst the mixture of good and evil, and clarity and confusion that characterize our days? Does it mean that we're imagining things, even if we misunderstand his purposes from time to time?

Far from it!

Our need to find purpose, to see a pattern, to live accordingly is hard-wired into us as human beings. It's not an accident that we crave patterns, whether this is as simple as $2+2=4$ or as complicated as the pattern of a well-lived and God-honouring life. There *is* a pattern for human life, and God *does* have a purpose for each one of us.

We need not apologize for using the kind of language that the good professor I quoted above is so critical of. We can certainly use these phrases more carefully and more humbly, but we are creatures who are made for a purpose and whose lives were made to fit the pattern God intended.

NEW CREATIONS

The new creation of Isaiah 65 is the end-result of what God wants to do and is doing in the world and for his people. In that sense, it is something that awaits us in the future.

But the new creation can also be our pattern right now.

What God can and will do on the macro-level—the new creation he promises where there are no more tears, no more infants dying, no more war, etc—he can and will do on the micro level as well if we will allow it.

For those who know what it means to struggle with addictions... new creation is possible.

For those picking up the pieces after a failed marriage... new creation is possible.

For those struggling with depression or mental illness... new creation is possible.

For those who are anxious or angry about their employment situation in an economic recession... new creation is possible.

For the child or young adult who has gone astray... new creation is possible.

God can make new creations out of your life, my life. He can resurrect goodness and peace and fruitful living out of disobedience, rebellion, and injustice.

We serve a God whose big pattern is mercy. Thanks be to God.

For a critical engagement of "Caveman Logic," visit:

<http://rynomi.wordpress.com/2009/07/01/stuck-in-the-cave/>