Sunday, January 31, 1993
THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S WILL
Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 18:10-14

A few days before Christmas, the beloved husband of one of our church members, and the father of their two sons, was involved in a one-car accident on Interstate 80, in which he was killed almost instantly. Miraculously, his wife and their two sons survived the accident without any major injuries.

This past week in Lincoln, a seven-year-old boy was killed in a school bus accident when he attempted to retrieve his cap, which had fallen in front of the bus.

Late last summer, on August 24, 1992, one of the strongest hurricanes to ever strike the southern part of Florida and other southern states, named Andrew, caused immense property damage and 38 deaths in southern Florida alone.

During the past year, most of us have been shocked by the deaths of thousands of children and adults in Somalia due to starvation and anarchy. Add to these the untimely deaths of thousands of others in Bosnia and nearby countries because of "ethnic cleansing" and the breakdown of order in those societies.

When these kinds of automobile accidents, tragedies, and natural disasters occur, we often hear talk about "the will of God." I remember back in 1989, when another hurricane, named Hugo, caused an enormous amount of damage to the southeastern coast of this country. Some of Jimmy and Tammy Bakker's supporters seriously suggested that it was God's will because it was God's way of warning the people who were prosecuting and testifying against the Bakkers to stop and let Bakker go free. Some even went further and said the hurricane was God's will because it was God's punishment on that part of the country for persecuting the Bakkers.

In his little book, The Will of God, Leslie Weatherhead tells about a friend of his whose beloved wife died. After her death, his friend said, "Well, I must just accept it. It is the will of God." But, said Weatherhead, the husband was himself a physician, and for weeks he had been fighting for her life. He had called in the best specialists and used all the devices and drugs of modern medicine. Was he then all that time fighting against the will of God? If she had recovered, would he not have called her recovery the will of God? Yet surely we cannot have it both ways. The woman's recovery and the woman's death cannot equally be the will of God in the sense of being God's intention.

Unfortunately, the phrase "the will of God" is frequently tossed about and used as a way of explaining the cause of too many things, often in an attempt to comfort those involved. After the school bus accident in Lincoln, in trying to comfort the driver of the bus, someone said, "If the Lord calls us, the Lord calls us, I don't care who's in charge of the wheel of the bus." Deep down, we know that's not true. God didn't cause the death of that little boy any more than God is causing the deaths of the thousands of children starving in Somalia.

It's nothing new. For thousands of years, people have been trying to use God or blame God or have said they know exactly what God's will is in every situation. Claiming to know God's will has been used not only in an effort to comfort people but also to try to keep church members in line and to convince the masses that killing Germans or Turks or the heathen or heretics or

people of a different religion is God's will. Untold human misery, physical and mental suffering, and even destruction and death have been the result.

Hurricane Andrew reminded me of another story about a natural disaster that appeared in the news a few years back. Lightning struck the York Minster Cathedral in England. The force of the blast splintered the Cathedral's 13th-century oak beams and sent the roof of the south transept collapsing in flames to the flagstones below.

The lightning bolt hit the Cathedral only three days after the consecration of the Reverend David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, a town 60 miles north of York. Bishop Jenkins was a somewhat controversial figure within the Church of England. His opponents argued that God was angered because he was made a Bishop and therefore sent the bolt of lightning as a divine warning.

The question then of what caused the destruction brought forth other theories as well. One person writing to a London newspaper said the lightning bolt was probably an accidental by-product of some Yorkshire farmer's prayer for rain. She went on to say, "For the God of storms is the God of harvests. Naturally, God sends rainstorms on request. It's hardly God's fault that the Christians insist on building their monuments directly in God's storm's flight path."

Bishop Jenkins himself, with a smile, offered some other theories. He said, "My daughter asked me why people didn't say instead that the devil was so angry at my consecration that he set the church on fire. There is room for miracles," he went on to say, "but you have to decide what the miracle proves." Jenkins believes that the bolt from the night sky was derived from "simple weather conditions."

Someone else commented that if God was really angered about the new Bishop's appointment, why didn't the lightning strike the Bishop himself rather than causing destruction to a historic Cathedral?

Perhaps it's natural for victims of accidents, disease, and natural disasters to try to console themselves by saying that it was God's will or in some other way trying to find a rational explanation.

Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a woman named Helen, who noticed herself getting tired after walking several blocks or standing in line. She chalked it up to getting older and having put on some extra weight. Then she began to stumble and fall over things. So she made an appointment with her physician.

The diagnosis was multiple sclerosis. The doctor explained that it was a degenerative nerve disease and that it would gradually get worse, maybe quickly, maybe gradually over many years.

When she got home, all she could think about was, "Why should this happen to me?" Was God personally reaching out to punish her for something she had done? She said, "I've tried to be a good person. I have a husband and young children who need me. I don't deserve this."

Her husband tried to console her. He took her hand and said, "You can't talk like that. God must have reasons for doing this, and it's not for us to question God. You have to believe that if God wants you to get better, you will get better, and if God doesn't want you to get better, there has to be some purpose to it."

Helen didn't want to question God or be angry at God. But her husband's words only made her feel more abandoned and more bewildered. And on top of it all, she felt guilty for being angry at God. And suppose God had sent her this affliction, how could she ask God to cure her of it? If it was God's will that she be sick, would she be going against God's will if she tried to get well?

To believe in a personal God does not mean that we also have to believe that God causes bad things to happen to us. At the same time, it's okay to question God or to be angry with God. God can handle it.

Much of the good news that Jesus brought is that it is not God's will that anything tragic or bad happen to any one of us or anyone else. Jesus said, according to the Gospel of Matthew, "It is not the will of your Father in heaven that any of these little ones should be lost." Although in this case, Jesus was referring especially to little children because they were the subject of that conversation, he was implying that God's will is the same for all of us. God's intentional will is that all of us would lead healthy, happy, fulfilling lives and die at a ripe old age.

God wills only the best for us. That's the first thing that Jesus taught about the mystery of God's will.

The second thing that Jesus said about the mystery of God's will is this: In spite of the fact that God wills the best for us, accidents and tragic things happen. As human beings created in God's image, we have the freedom to make choices, and some of our choices are not always the best. Furthermore, your choices and my choices, good and bad, almost always have an effect on others as well as ourselves. We also have the freedom to make mistakes and to fail. If I choose to smoke tobacco most of my life, the odds are that it will adversely affect my health and the health of others. It is not God's will that I die of lung cancer if that should happen. That is the result of my choices and my will.

The third thing Jesus said about God's will is that we can never completely know or understand it. There are many accidents and tragedies in this life that don't make any sense. St. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable are God's ways." Jesus said the same thing in another way: "God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." We can paraphrase, "Hurricanes and earthquakes and accidents happen whether we are good or bad."

There is a mysteriousness about God that is always beyond us, and yet, as Jesus demonstrated and taught, underneath it all, God loves and cares for us. Beware of anyone or any religion that claims to know God's will in any or every situation. At times, God may seem indifferent, yet we know that God dwells in us and we dwell in God.

In some ways, it seems to me that God is like life itself — the older we grow, the more mysterious life becomes. We sometimes say to a young person that when she grows up, she will know more — but that is only a half-truth. The other half is that an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. The more we know, the more the mystery grows. To put it in another frame of reference, in a sermon some months ago, I quoted Dr. Lewis Thomas, who wrote, "What is the greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science? The greatest accomplishment of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance."

The final thing that can be said about the mystery of God's will is that in spite of the mystery, because God is love, I know that I cannot drift beyond God's love and care, or as St. Paul put it, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing! Who among us can even comprehend the kind of love that dies on a cross and does not fight back? Who among us can comprehend the kind of love that forgives one's enemies? We can only stand in reverence, awe, and gratitude in the presence of that kind of love.

Jesus never said to his disciples, "I have explained the world." Rather, he said, "I have overcome the world."

Here's an illustration that Dr. Leslie Weatherhead uses, which has been helpful to me in understanding the mystery of God's will. Picture in your mind a group of children playing beside a small stream that runs down a mountainside to join a river in the valley below. These children can divert the stream and get great fun out of damming it up with stones and earth. But they cannot ever completely succeed in preventing the water from reaching the river below.

In regard to God, we may divert and hinder God's purposes, but we can never finally defeat them. Trust God. Find your rest in the loving nature of God. God, who began this strange adventure we call human life, will also control the end. Amen.