

When Lauren and Ann first told me that my sermon had to be about God's plan and how my plan often doesn't align with God's, my first thought was, "Oh this is going to be easy." The world is full of callous and horrifying issues that make us look up to the sky and ask, "Why God?" Issues like people putting ketchup on their vanilla ice cream . . . or when people say that all Japanese anime is for nerds only . . . or death and poverty . . . but mostly the vanilla ice cream. I mean, come on, anyone can complain about the world right?

But being honest, it's not ketchup, anime or even the idea of my own death that keeps me up at night. It's my existence. I remember when I decided to read the Bible from cover to cover in seventh grade, starting at Genesis and ending at Revelations. I tore through the familiar first few pages, covering the creation of the world and the life that populates it. I finished the first chapter of the Bible and I asked a very simple question: "Why? Why did God need to create anything? Isn't God perfect? Isn't God self sustaining and self sufficient?" I contemplated these questions for a while, but moved on to other familiar stories such as Cain and Abel and Noah and the flood. But these questions wouldn't go away. They haunted me for days and I realized they disturbed me so much to my core because what I was really asking was, "Why do I exist? What is **my** purpose here?" And I couldn't seem to find a good answer.

I wish I could tell you this was where my faith in Jesus stepped in, how I found purpose in my life by living the life Jesus wanted me to, by being a good Christian and spreading the Good Word. But accepting the answer that religion gave me felt too easy. It seemed like the default answer everyone was telling me to believe in. I was unwilling to define my own purpose off of something that was written thousands of years ago and the message simply didn't emotionally resonate with me. The answer to this question, I felt, I had to find for myself.

So I started searching. The first answer I found for myself was leaving a legacy. After all, every kid has that belief that they're special, that one day there would be statues commemorating their accomplishments. However, I realized that wanting to be remembered was a lost cause. Human legacy, reputation, and honor were all things I felt were often earned without merit and lost without deserving. Human memory was something unreliable, and the sobering fact was that for most people, no one alive remembers a person's name 75 years after their death. So I decided to change my goal to making a difference, not leaving a legacy. By this time, I was old enough to realize that the chances of my doing something spectacular to truly change the world were pretty low, but that didn't discourage me. I wanted to contribute to a cause no matter how small my contribution was. I wanted to die knowing that my life had left an overall positive impact on the world. So I tried to live my life according to this philosophy as best as I could. I made an effort to be kind to everyone. I donated to charity. I volunteered. I continued this kind of philosophy and I did *feel* better while doing these acts, but they didn't offer a sense of fulfillment. I was happy, but I couldn't deny the sense that I was missing something, something critical to my being. Good deeds offered me temporary happiness, but it fell short of offering spiritual contentment. The question slowly came back to me, haunting me at night and stealing me of my sleep. Why does that matter? Who cares if you do good in the world? Being a good person who does good things, I realized, didn't mean I had a purpose.

I didn't take this realization well. Every inspirational figure I looked to seemed to point to the same answer. Mother Teresa, Steve Jobs, Martin Luther King all seemed to say, "Do something, make a difference." But I couldn't make a difference that wouldn't be erased by the constant erosion of time. The answer that I had been trying so long to avoid finally caught up to me: I didn't have a purpose. The answer to "What is the meaning of life?" simply seemed to be

that there was none. In my enthusiastic pursuit for a sense of belonging and fulfillment I had optimistically assumed that I did have a place in this world, that I did exist with a purpose. The answer was so cruelly simple: I don't. Of course my life didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. I was simply a coincidence. This kind of nihilistic point of view consumed me. I no longer cared about myself, or bothered to take care of myself. I was no longer passionate or enthusiastic about helping others or serving. Psalm 23:5 describes a cup overflowing to bless others, but I couldn't overflow to bless other cups when my own was empty. Living my life according to such a depressive philosophy had profound negative effects to my faith but I held onto my beliefs. I was convinced I had found the answer, the truth that adults were too polite to tell naive young children.

It was around junior year when all these questions came to a head. I was living out my negative philosophies, barely keeping up with my schoolwork and slowly pushing my friends away. I was exhausted. I wanted to enjoy the activities that I participated in, but like a pebble in a shoe my thoughts would always be there, stealing me of any joy. I thought that this was the end of my faith journey, that I was destined to live this way for the rest of my life. But the only thing constant in life is inconstancy, and I found myself inexplicably drawn to religion again. I forced myself to attend church even though I felt as though I was gaining nothing from it. I found myself reading the Bible again, comforting myself with the familiar pages and stories. God seemed to pull me slowly towards His embrace, reminding me of why I ever bothered reading the Bible in the first place. It wasn't so that I could have some grand purpose to the universe, it was to feel God's love, to understand that I held purpose to God. These thoughts culminated in the familiar verses of Jeremiah 29:11-12 that said "For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on

me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” Throughout every realization and insight that I found in the Bible and in church, this was the most profound, deeply affecting me emotionally and spiritually for reasons I couldn’t explain. Through my understanding of how small I was, God’s love for me felt all the more mysterious and amazing. Through my understanding of how powerless I was, God’s plan and use for me was baffling. It didn’t matter. Of course, there will be times when I forget all this. Times when not knowing my purpose will cause me confusion and sadness. But keeping the faith that God has a purpose for all of us is the highest form of faith that I can think of. To me, that is the good fight that we are called to fight, to not despair but to find hope through God.

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