

The Road Less Traveled – September 28, 2018

My wife and I watched the premier episode of NBC's new show *Manifest* the other night. She had seen the previews a while back and really wanted to watch it. The last time she was excited about a show was a couple of years ago in the weeks before *This Is Us* premiered, so I definitely listened to her this time.

Manifest turned out to be a pretty good watch, though it's hard to imagine how the writers will stretch out the story line over multiple seasons. If you aren't familiar with *Manifest*, the premise of the show is that a passenger plane, flying from Jamaica to New York, experiences severe turbulence while in flight. When the plane lands, the passengers and crew learn that five years have passed, during which time they had all been presumed dead. The initial episode focuses largely on those on the plane trying to reintegrate into their families and jobs, all of which have moved on during their absence. It's kind of *Castaway* writ large.

But there was something else that caught my eye. At the beginning of the episode, one of the central characters, Michaela Stone, is having a conversation with her mother about her ambivalence about actually marrying her fiancé. Michaela's mother, who takes a different flight and dies in the intervening five years, tells Michaela "All things work together for good." Michaela eventually sees the same verse embroidered on a throw pillow that her mother made after her disappearance.

The verse, it is later revealed, comes from Romans 8:28, ironically the same number as the ill-fated flight – 828. I will be interested to see if the writers explore this theological concept further. I certainly hope they will.

I hope so because it is one of those pithy sayings that we use to comfort one another during times of hardship. But it's also one that can end up doing more harm than good if we don't understand it. The full verse reads, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose."

Paul's point here is not that God will make sure everything works out in our lives. Paul is writing to a church in turmoil, a church facing not only internal pressures but persecution from the surrounding community. No doubt it made it hard to keep the faith. Paul's point here is one of encouragement. Trust in the sovereignty of God, he essentially says. Trust that the trials that you are facing now are molding and shaping you into the image of God. You may not be able to see it now or even imagine it, but good will come from this time.

It's a powerful message, much more powerful than God will make everything all right. Because the simple, painful truth is that sometimes things do not work out all right. Sometimes a marriage crumbles. Sometimes a job is lost. Sometimes the flood hits our house. And sometimes the treatment fails, and disease wins. In those times, a shallow theology can drive us away from a God who appears to renege on promises.

A deeper, more mature theology, drives us into God's arms. Because the deeper our theology, the deeper our understanding of our need for God. That what God truly promises us is love, grace and presence. And that's what we really need.

See you Sunday.