One of the oldest and most perplexing questions in Christian theology is this: Is God responsible for everything that happens – and, if so, how come such awful things keep happening? In recent weeks, we have seen over eight thousand people killed and over half a million families made homeless by an earthquake in Nepal; we have seen eight people killed and hundreds injured when an Amtrak train derailed in Philadelphia. Was someone who boarded that train and lost their life unlucky or doomed? Was someone who changed their plans or ran late and missed the train saved by serendipity or divine intervention? To some of you, I know, these questions are pointless and irrelevant, but to many they are troubling and echo around in the deepest chambers of the heart. When you slammed on the brakes, swerved, and narrowly missed hitting someone who stepped out into the road, did you breathe a little prayer of gratitude? When the awful event does happen to you, do you find yourself at some level asking what you did to deserve this?

The composer of the psalm we heard this morning had an answer for you – very simple and very clear: “. . . the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” That was, in fact, the orthodox theology of the day. It was the same theology that Job was confronted with by his so-called friends. According to this way of seeing the world, if something awful happens to you, it means you’ve done something awful to deserve it; righteous people are rewarded by God with good things in life. I have to tell you that theology has never set well with me (it didn’t set well with Job either, by the way). It’s a kind of circular logic – reminds me a little of the old witch test: throw her in the river, and if she drowns it means she was a witch. That notion never took into account the fact that some people can swim and some can’t.

I may be reading a bit into the story, but it seems to me that the disciples we read about in the book of Acts were viewing things differently. When it came to making a crucial decision about who should assume one of the leadership roles in this community of the followers of Jesus, they didn’t do interviews and check references to determine who was most qualified or who was more holy. They threw the dice. Scripture says, “they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias.” What “casting lots” meant was that they wrote the names of each candidate on stones, and put the stones into a vessel, then shook it until one of them fell out. That was their guy. Now, the clear implication of scripture is that they were seeking divine guidance in casting the lots, but my reaction to it is that, at some level, they were acknowledging that random chance was not, as you and I often think, a totally separate thing from divine providence.

Maybe it’s not all as cut and dried as the Psalmist seems to think. Maybe the rain does, indeed, fall on the just and unjust alike. And maybe sometimes you get rained on simply
because you happen to be outside at the time. But is there in the randomness of what may befall any of us at any time still a divine hand at work in a manner of which we may have only the slightest hints? We’re in very murky and uncertain territory here. Let me talk about that murkiness for a moment. I’m reminded of something I heard the other day. Jeffrey Brown, the outstanding PBS NewsHour correspondent, has written a book of poetry called The News Poems. In it there is a poem titled “The Art of the Interview”. He describes a time during a news interview when the lights suddenly went out in the studio and writes, “. . . still, again, always in the dark.” I love that line. It reflects a raw existential truth. Whether the lights are on or not, you and I are in many ways “still, again, always in the dark.” I think that’s partly how it’s intended to be. The deepest truths in life are clouded in mystery. Faith is little more than groping around in the dark hoping to touch a portion of that truth, and the task of groping in the dark for truth is growth-producing and, ironically, enlightening.

Well, my groping in the dark attempting to touch the mystery of grace, providence, luck, and serendipity leads me, as is often the case, to the adjoining dark room where the mysteries of science are housed. Albert Einstein famously said, “God doesn’t play dice with the world.” He said that in reference to the theories of quantum physics that were being put forward by others. Einstein simply couldn’t quite get his very consequential mind around the uncertainty and randomness that quantum theory predicted to be at the heart of existence. But, indeed, scientists have found that uncertainty—that constant rolling of the dice—does turn out to very predictably describe the workings of the sub-atomic, quantum realm of reality.

Here’s my contention: kind of like the disciples in the early church did, God does indeed play dice with the world. But it’s God’s casino, and the dice are loaded.

The fundamental question that motivates much of cosmology is this: Why should there be something rather than nothing? Why are there sunsets, and Toyotas, and people, and stars, and galaxies? Why is there matter, and energy, and laws of physics? I can’t answer that question to the satisfaction of many scientists, but I can suggest that the existence of existence argues for the existence of divine grace. This is so because in order for stars, and sunsets, and Toyotas to be, the universe has to contain all the necessary ingredients (matter and energy and laws of physics), and if those elements and laws were not balanced in a way for order to emerge, there would be nothing but chaos—or nothing at all. To put this in another way, all of the randomness at the tiniest heart of existence, in the realm of quantum physics, has to be ruled by laws of probability that ultimately lead to an ordered universe in order for our world to be. To put this another way, the created order, even though ruled by a great deal of random chance, is heavily tilted by its very existence in the direction of things working, being held together, and continuing. To put this another way, God plays dice with the world, but the dice are loaded.

This all should not come as a great surprise to you. You know that terrible things can and do happen. But if you give it a little thought, you know also that most of the time, on most days, in most places and most circumstances, terrible things do not happen. An horrific earthquake in Nepal makes news around the world because it is a rare occurrence. If devastating, life taking, home destroying earthquakes were happening in all places at all times, our species could not survive. Yes, eight people died and hundreds were injured when a train
went off the tracks. But over the last ten years alone, trains along the Northeast Corridor have safely carried over a hundred and thirteen million passengers. The nature of nature is that it all manages to work. Even human agencies and activities, as bumbling as they often are, mostly succeed. Reality is tilted in the direction of order, and creation is tilted in the direction of grace. Terrible accidents happen; misery befalls us. But how many times have you breathed a sigh of relief when the terrible accident was narrowly avoided? How many days, how many hours and minutes with sufficient food, shelter, and even a degree of love can you tally up in your life? If you add it all up and put in the balances the catastrophes and hurts on one side, and the times of life basically working and offering possibility and promise on the other, it’s not even close. This is not by accident; it’s how the world is put together. I’m telling you, the dice are loaded.

What are grace, providence, luck, and serendipity? Here’s my answer: they’re all different words for the same thing. No, I don’t think God decides one day that there’s going to be an earthquake and these particular eight thousand people are going to lose their lives. And I don’t think that holy and righteous people get all the goodies in life or that if some terrible thing happens to you it’s because you did something to deserve it. But I do think that grace and providence are built into the created order. Just ask the disciples. When they went to fill Judas’s place, they had sufficient confidence in how God put the world together that they simply rolled the dice.
Pastoral Prayer

O God, we come before you from the abundance of our lives. We give you thanks for homes and families and friends, for sunlit days and green fields, for minds that are given the power to search for meaning and discover truths, for hearts of compassion and the capacity to hold values and principles that endure. Out of a deep awareness of all the great gifts of life, we emerge on this day to offer thanks and acknowledge our dependence on your abiding grace.

Even in times of trial and great struggle we know that your spirit of healing and hope surrounds us and upholds us. We pray that you would make us even more mindful of the abundance of your radical love.

We pray that your Spirit of Love would take us by the hand and guide us to higher levels of awareness, to greater understanding. We pray that you would show us more clearly in every decision we face, in every crossroad we encounter, the light that shines upon our path and shows the way.

Make us mindful of the example of Jesus, and help us to walk the roads he walked, and hear the wisdom he imparted. Help us to see, as he showed us, the humanity and the divinity in every person we encounter, in every need that arises before us, in every hungry belly and every hungry heart. Teach us his uncompromising love and his unflinching devotion to you. Make us, we pray, into his Good News for the world.

We ask these things in his name, and offer his prayer:
“Our father, who art in heaven . . .”