

Up: I Didn't Ask for Any of This
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Romans 8:28-39

Last week Pastor Katie kicked off our Summer Sermon Series on Faith and Films, with a look at the original **Toy Story** movie in light of a passage in the book of Ecclesiastes. Today I want to pick up with one of my favorite movies, **Up**, and tie it to a passage from the letter to the Romans.

Up, in case you have not seen the movie, is an animated film about a widowed balloon salesman, Carl Fredericksen, and his adventure in a flying house that lands in South America.

Carl and his deceased wife Ellie met as kids who were both interested in adventure and shared a life-long goal to travel to a place called Paradise Falls in the wilds of South America, a place they'd heard about from newsreels when they were children.

Near the beginning of the movie, there is a two minute wordless montage of scenes showing Carl and Ellie's life together from their courtship to her eventual death, sweetly showing how much they adore each other and how they endure the trials of life, including some heartbreaking disappointments.

Each time their jar of money marked Paradise Falls is nearly full, they have to break it open to pay for some emergency—a car repair, an injury requiring hospitalization, a need to fix the house when a tree falls on it. She gets sick and dies before they are ever able to make their long awaited trip to Paradise Falls.

Carl, bitter and alone, returns to life in their little home, construction begins to build up around it, and when some people from Shady Rest retirement center come to take him away, he literally launches a plan, releasing hundreds of balloons that uproot the house and send it soaring. Little does Carl know, however, that a young wilderness explorer scout named Russell, who'd earlier shown up at his door to try to get his "assisting the elderly badge", is out on his porch when the house starts to fly away.

The Apostle Paul, in writing his letter to the Romans, surely was not imagining widowers and wilderness explorers in flying houses, but as a first century follower of the risen Christ, he did know all about people experiencing disappointments and death and undergoing peril and persecution and having the sense that good things might just be at an end for him and those early followers. Listen now for some of what he writes to members of the early church in Rome.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for

*us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,
'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

My favorite scene in the movie **Up** isn't the beautiful opening montage of Carl's life with Ellie. Nor is it watching the nearly eighty year old Carl's death-defying showdown with his childhood hero-become-enemy, the power-mad adventurer Charles Muntz (and his gigantic blimp and pack of talking remote controlled dogs). It's not even knowing that Carl takes all of this on in the interest of rescuing a ridiculous rare bird dubbed Kevin, and that annoying little boy Russell, and the cone-of-shame wearing dog named Dug. It isn't watching how the dogs get distracted when someone yells, "Squirrel!" Squirrel! Although that is a funny bit.

My favorite scene isn't even when, at the end of the movie, after Carl and Russell have returned to life in the United States, and the old curmudgeon has become a true grandpa figure to the boy, Carl shows up to pin the last badge on Russell's Wilderness Explorer sash.

No, my favorite scene in the movie is the one where Carl, out in the wilds of South America somewhere with that boy Russell who'd accidentally wound up on his flying house, and the dog Dug who has adopted Carl as a new master, has just watched the bird Kevin get taken away and yells out, shaking his fist at the sky, "I didn't ask for any of this!"

"I didn't ask for any of this!" That's the moment I fell in love with **Up**. That's the moment when it became more than a heartwarming story and started to feel real. Even with a giant rainbow-colored cassowary creature on steroids, a talking dog, a flying house, and everything else. That's when it started to feel real.

Because who can't relate to an, "I didn't ask for any of this!" moment?

The widow or widower who had plans for growing old (or even older) with their spouse, and now faces day after day of details and piles of paperwork and just misses the companionship of their beloved. They didn't ask for any of that.

The person dealing with all of the losses aging can bring in addition to the death of spouses and friends, like the loss of eyesight, hearing, mobility, independence. They didn't ask for any of that.

The one who receives a diagnosis they'd rather not hear for themselves or for a loved one. They didn't ask for that.

The sandwich generation parent of teens or young adults who feels the pressure of the needs of aging parents on one hand and getting their own children actually launched on the other. They didn't ask for that.

The individual faced with a tough work environment, or some sort of crisis at home, or tragedy in their personal life, or some dilemma that seems impossible, unbearable, just frankly too hard to solve. They didn't ask for that.

Who among us hasn't had an "I didn't ask for any of this!" moment?

They happen all the time.

When the way you've always done it doesn't work anymore, because the culture has changed around you.

When you are thrust into a situation that demands you step up and take a stand, though you'd rather just sit in the background.

When life comes at you on life's terms and those terms are not the ones you would have negotiated, if you'd had a say.

What do you and I do, we do, when "We didn't ask for any of this!"?

That's the question, isn't it? I think today's scripture passage and others like it give us some possible answers.

Number one, like our buddy Carl Fredericksen, the nearly octogenarian widower, it's okay to be angry about it, at least for a while. We may not want to stay there forever, because who wants to be in a perpetual state of rage? Anger that is held onto eventually hardens into resentment, and resentment becomes bitterness, and bitter is really no way to live.

But experiencing anger about a situation that we face or have faced is natural. We can't help it.

So we might take comfort in the fact that the book of Psalms gives people of faith a model for taking our anger to God. You can't make it through the book of Psalms without coming up against some really angry speech directed to God—anger about enemies, anger about situations, anger at God for not acting the way the psalmist wants God to act. The book of Psalms gives us this tool for being angry even with God.

We might also note that, in our passage for today, Paul tells the Romans and us that nothing, nothing at all, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. If persecution and peril, hardship and vulnerability, distress and death won't do it, our anger won't do it either. Did you get that? Your anger will not make God's love go away.

Number two, when we think, "I didn't ask for any of this!" we might consider that there are all sorts of wonderful things that we didn't ask for and frankly can't say we actually deserve that come to us as well. There is so much grace in life, so much beauty, so much wonder if we will only open our eyes to it. The people who wind up coming into your life, the people who stand by you and with you, who bring you joy, you didn't necessarily ask for that, but it happened. Every day I look at Judith, every day, I think, "Wow. I didn't exactly ask for this. It's so much better than I could have imagined."

Even in the midst of tragedy, there is the love and support of community and the appreciation for what you have or had, even as you are losing it.

One of the most powerful books I've ever read was written by Gerald Sittser, a college professor who wrote in *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, about how he lost his wife, his mother, and his young daughter when a car plowed into them one day. He wrote of how he came to

see that while they didn't deserve that—and he didn't deserve to have them taken from him—he came to understand that he did not “deserve” to have them in the first place. As much as we wish it were so, life is not about getting what we deserve.

Sittser writes: *“Gifts of grace come to all of us. But we must be ready to see and willing to receive these gifts. It will require a kind of sacrifice, the sacrifice that comes in actually **believing that, however painful our losses, life can still be good — good in a different way than before, but nevertheless good.** I will never recover from my loss and I will never get over missing the ones I lost. But I still cherish life. . . . I will always want the ones I lost back again. I long for them with all my soul. But I still celebrate the life I have found because they are gone. I have lost, but I have also gained. I lost the world I loved, but I gained a deeper awareness of grace. That grace has enabled me to clarify my purpose in life and rediscover the wonder of the present moment.”*

I didn't say that. I don't know if I could say that. But Gerald Sittser, who lost his wife, his mother, and his young daughter in one day, said it from first-hand experience. He testified, along with the Apostle Paul, that *all things*—even unasked for and unwished for things-- *can work together for good for those who love God*. That's something that can only come firsthand—it's not something someone else can give you or tell you. It's something a person grows into for themselves.

A third thing to remember when you or I think “I didn't ask for any of this!” is what Mordecai told his cousin the queen in the book of Esther.

The Jews in Persia are under threat, and through a turn of events she has become the queen of King Xerxes. She didn't ask for any of it, but it was her chance to do what she could for her people. “It may be,” her cousin Mordecai told her when it became clear that she needed to go advocate with the King on behalf of her people, *“It may be that you have come into the Kingdom for such a time as this.”*

She didn't ask for that. It just was.

Carl Fredericksen, imaginary cartoon character though he is, was not the first person to think “I didn't ask for this!”

The patriarch Joseph, thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, jailed for a crime he didn't commit, surely thought that, but he came to a place where he was able to save the very brothers who threw him into the pit and in doing so he makes the comment, *“You meant it for evil, but God turned it to good.”*

The deliverer Moses, who surely more than once in his journey with the people of Israel from his encounter with the burning bush on, thought, “I didn't ask for any of this!” nevertheless became the instrument through which they were delivered from Egypt and brought through the wilderness.

The prophet Jeremiah, who would have been safer keeping quiet, but nonetheless had to tell the truth to the King more than once, thought, and I can quote you chapter and verse on that, “I didn't ask for any of this.”

And think about Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying, “If it be your will, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not my will but yours be done.” Jesus was essentially saying, “I didn't ask for any of this.” But he did what he had to do.

And so have people over the centuries. They've done what they had to do.

The American soldiers of all races who came ashore in Normandy on a June day 75 years ago this month didn't ask for any of that, they asked not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country. Huge numbers of them died.

The men and women who were beaten in the march on Selma and mistreated in a thousand ways over the last 400 years since Africans first arrived on these shores didn't ask for that. They didn't ask to be clubbed, or attacked by dogs, or treated as second class citizens

The brave souls who stood up at Stonewall and those who have had their human rights denied for being queer folk didn't ask to be harassed and oppressed. They didn't ask for any of it.

The people who even today, even this morning, are working to protect a young woman at risk didn't ask for any of this. Nor did she ask to be placed in peril.

Whenever we think, I didn't ask for any of this, maybe it's worth keeping a few things in mind.

1. It's okay to be angry, but don't stay stuck there.
2. There's plenty more that we didn't ask for or deserve that is good and that God can work with what is.
3. Maybe you and I came to whatever situation it is that we face and didn't ask for because God has work for us to do.

If I could I'd take that little soda pop bottle cap that Carl Fredericksen pins on Russell's uniform, and I'd pin it on each and every one of us. We didn't ask for any of it. But God can use us, sure enough.