

B Lectionary 28 10.13.24

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Focus Statement: Everything happens, and God is in everything.

I've recently started listening to the podcast of a theologian out of Duke Divinity School named Kate Bowler. Dr. Bowler is a writer, a historian, and, by her own definition, "an expert in the idea that good things happen to good people." What she means by this is, Dr. Bowler researches what is known as the Prosperity Gospel, a strain of Christianity that teaches that God wants us to be wealthy and happy. That if we are faithful enough, pray correctly, give enough to the church, etc., God will bless us. The most extreme versions of this theology are rampant on late night Christian television, where well-dressed televangelists with great hair shout about how God wants you to live your best life now and will bless you with health, wealth, happiness, if only you send your seed offering of some amount of money to support their ministry. It's a con couched in religion, and we can see through it pretty easily. I've joked with several of you before about how Facebook Live has made me a televangelist, and yet I'm still waiting patiently for my private jet. I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong...

I joke about it, and Dr. Bowler jokes about it, but as she points out in her writings, she was, we all are, all likely followers of our own quieter version of this idea that good things happen to good people. Dr. Bowler goes so far as to call it the great American civil religion, this idea that if we are good and faithful and hardworking, certainly we will be rewarded for our efforts.¹ The problem with this theology, the danger with this theology, is that it does

¹ Kate Bowler, "'Everything happens for a reason' – and other lies I've loved," filmed November 2018 in Palm Springs, CA. TEDMED video, 14:49, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTcJmIbn5nw>>.

not work. It does not work. [pause]. It does not work, and when it does not work, when we are good and faithful and hardworking and do everything right, and the bottom still drops out on our lives, the question we can find ourselves asking is where then is God? If our faith is built on the idea that God rewards us for good actions and curses us for bad, and events unfold that feel cursed and we know we did nothing wrong, then where then is God?

And here is where Job comes in. Because one of the gifts of Job is this is a book meant to wrest from us our illusion of control. Last week we heard of how Job, a man who was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil,” had everything taken from him one by one, his wealth, his family, his ability to provide for himself, even, eventually, his health. Our reading ended with Job sitting among the ashes, scratching his sores with a potshard, reflecting on a world filled with both good and bad, yet “in all this Job did not sin with his lips.” Quite the noble and faithful guy, more faith than I can imagine myself having in such a situation.

Today we jumped some twenty-three chapters, so let me fill you in on what happened between then and now. The last three verses of chapter two tell about how when three of Job’s friends heard of his troubles, they rushed to his side. Verse thirteen is in my opinion one of the most beautiful passages about how to respond when someone is suffering. It reads, “They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.” Job’s friends sat on the ground with him in silence. If you ever hear of a loved one, or even someone you don’t know all that well, who is suffering, and you don’t know how best to respond, do that. Show up and

sit there. If you can't be there in person, or it's not appropriate to be there in person, send a card, make a phone call, shoot a text message, anything. Reach out. This is the ministry and the gift of presence, and it is powerful. This is a bit of an aside but there is an absolutely gorgeous essay by a woman named Deirdre Sullivan titled "Always Go to the Funeral," that addresses this very idea. "Always go to the funeral" writes Sullivan, "means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it...In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity." On reflecting what brought her comfort in the death of her father, Sullivan reflected, "I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral."²

Job's friends went to the funeral, if you will. They showed up and they sat by their friend in silence for seven days and seven nights. And then the temptation to make meaning out of Job's suffering got the better of them. The chapters between then and now have been a series of Job's friends trying to explain why this could be happening to Job. It started out innocuously enough. Various versions of what Dr. Bowler refers to as "lies I've loved." Ancient versions of well-worn platitudes, phrases like, "everything happens for a reason" or "God has a better plan" or "this test will make you stronger." But as Job continued to insist

² Michele Norris, "Always Go to the Funeral," 8 Aug 2005, in *This I Believe*, produced by NPR, <<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/4785079>>.

on his own innocence, the arguments deepened. By chapter twenty-three, one of Job's friends has finally reached the decision that Job must have sinned in some horrendous way that displeased God, and if only Job would repent and return to God, certainly God would be merciful and forgive Job for his evil actions. Our reading is Job's harsh rebuttal of this insinuation of his guilt. "Oh, that I knew where I might find [God]," Job cried in response, "that I might come even to [God's] dwelling! I would lay my case before [God], and fill my mouth with arguments." So convicted was Job in his innocence that he begged to sit before God in divine judgement, for then, said Job, "I should be acquitted forever." But Job cannot make his case before God, because he couldn't find God. "If I go forward, "[God] is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive [God]; on the left [God] hides, and I cannot behold [God]; I turn to the right, but I cannot see [God]."

Job cannot find God, cannot feel God's presence, cannot make sense of his suffering. And the beauty Job gives us is he didn't try to. His friends did, oh his friends did. But not Job, Job just sat in the thick of life and railed at a God who was big enough to hold his hurt. Job gives us the promise that the world does not always make sense, that we cannot always have answers, that there is no easy excuse for suffering. We don't have to make sense of it all, there doesn't have to be a reason, we don't have to be ok. Our God is built of tougher stuff than that. These words may come as small comfort, and they're certainly not the warm puppies and rainbows, we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps message of the eternal optimism of the benefits of hard work. But like the rich man in the Gospel story found, there are no bootstraps long enough to pull us to God. Ours is a God of impossibility made possible, who ends up in the middle of wherever we are, blessing us not with riches

or ease, but with the grace and strength of a God who has walked through death and beyond for us. With the promise of a God who in dying destroyed death, so that we would never be separated from God, even in the times where, like Job, we feel like we are.

I mentioned at the start, I've gotten into listening to Dr. Bowler's podcast. The podcast is called Everything Happens. In it, she talks "to funny and wise people about how to live with the knowledge that, well, everything happens." Not that everything happens for a reason, just that everything happens. Dr. Bowler describes her life motto as: "Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. For everyone. So, if you have ever ruined some perfectly good small talk at a party with your honesty, we're already friends." Dr. Bowler closes every episode with a blessing. I want to close today by sharing with you one of my favorites.

Says Dr. Bowler, "Blessed are you who are tired of feeling grateful all the time, who feel more comfortable with moments of rage and negativity and venting all that you lost. Blessed are you when you say hand on your heart that there are truths you wish you could unlearn, riches you wish you could get back. The innocence, hope, the sweet fearlessness of never having lost. You are resilient, but I wish you never had to be. Your survival cost you. And it's okay to name it. To be grateful AND outraged. You might never get the apologies you're owed, and we long to hear them say it: I'm sorry. I should have believed you. I should have sheltered you. This never should have happened. The almost truths are difficult to swallow. Yes. We learned so much. Yes, we overcame, we grew. But this perspective, we would give it back in a heartbeat. Bless us, God, in our gratitude, in our anger, in our survival. And may you, my dear, be met today with gentleness and stillness and peace,

energy, momentum, and rest. Whatever it takes to carry the weight of all this resilience.

Bless you, my dears.”³ Amen.

³ Kate Bowler, “The Cost of Survival with Emi Nietfeld,” season 11, episode 4, in *Everything Happens*, produced by Kate Bowler, podcast, 51:01, <<https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-cost-of-survival/>>.