

## **"Blessed?"**

### **Sermon on Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019**

A few years ago the *New York Times* published an interesting religious opinion piece by Kate Bowler. Bowler was a young, thirty-five-year-old historian who taught at Duke Divinity School, and her piece was called "Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me." It was published on February 13, 2016. The article had huge personal ramifications for the young scholar who had grown up on the Canadian plains, in a Mennonite community near Winnipeg.

Four months prior to that article she had been diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. It was a "massive tumor" and not as first suspected, a bad gallbladder, that was causing her abdominal pain. As you can imagine, the diagnosis was devastating. After falling to her knees in tears, and crying in the arms of her husband, one of the first thoughts she had was also, "*Oh, God, this is ironic.*" Why? Because she had recently published a book called "Blessed."

As a historian of Christianity, Bowler has specialized in the American prosperity gospel that promises health, wealth, and happiness. For her book she spent ten years interviewing megachurch pastors, watching televangelists, and listening to celebrities pray for people in wheelchairs. She joined 900 tourists on a trip to Israel with Benny Hinn. Bowler observed that even some of her own famously modest Canadian Anabaptists bought into the idea that the right kind of faith leads to blessings.

For many Christians, "being blessed" is the entire goal of the gospel and they tend to make sure that they are "blessed" under any circumstances. Of course, the question remains, and can hit you personally in no time - what do you do when you don't feel so blessed, when true suffering knocks on your door, when the stars seem to align against you? Do you just re-frame the entire experience and somehow, with lots of spin and lots of faith, call yourself blessed? Or do you experience the suffering and the questions and the doubt as part of your faith journey without the happy end assured? Do you allow yourself to be broken or do you put up a strong face (face as in *f a c e* and as in *f a i t h*)? These kinds of questions will only ever be answered by the faithful who experience them, and the answers range from Job who was unapologetically questioning his fate and threw back into God's face, to Paul, who sang Christ's praises while tied to a block in a dungy prison.

Tom Brokaw wrote a book a few years ago called, "A Lucky Life Interrupted," in which he described his fight with blood cancer. It is a very positive and genuine book, and Brokaw, with a brilliant career and interesting life experiences behind him when all of this happened, had lots of reasons to be grateful and positive in the midst of an incredibly difficult challenge. He had been lucky, blessed, successful, famous, grounded, appreciated, respected, loved. Kate Bowler, when she was diagnosed three years ago, had only just begun her life and career. And she was not so sure whether this would be a life interrupted or a life prematurely ended. How could she know?

One of the most common things Christians say when they face adversity is: "everything happens for a reason." This is what one of Kate Bowler's neighbors said after knocking on her door. "I'd love to hear it," said Bowler's husband, overhearing the comment. "Pardon?!" replied the surprised neighbor. "I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying," he said. We can imagine a little awkward silence following that exchange. I am not mentioning this in order to say that we should never use the statement "everything happens for a reason," I am not even saying that it is false, but sometimes it's the wrong thing to say in the midst of the raw reckoning with shocking news that people haven't even begun to digest.

Well, what does all of this have to do with Palm Sunday and Holy Week, which we enter today? The answer is simple: everything!!! How does Jesus deal with his own suffering, with the death sentence looming over his life, with the stars above Jerusalem seemingly aligned against him? Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, introducing an early Christian hymn of praise, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," and the hymn of praise continues to highlight Christ's humility and willingness to share even the most brutal human experiences with us. So, what was Jesus' mind like during that time? One thing Jesus did not say in those days between his entrance in Jerusalem and the crucifixion on the day before the Sabbath... he didn't say, "I am blessed to be suffering." The way that the gospels describe the Passion of Christ - and each gospel dedicates a very considerable portion to this part of his life - he accepted his fate with little enthusiasm and with understated hope, but not as a hero who doesn't mind getting his hands and feet pierced by nails, not as a saint who doesn't get bothered by his lungs being suffocated on a dumb Roman cross. He was human.

Is there something we can learn from the way Jesus dealt with his own suffering? Let's remember: he had helped many other people; he had cured individuals from blindness and physical disability, he restored the speech of one, and he even brought back to life one or two people, according to the gospels. And yet, when it came to his own life, his own health, he appeared to be mysteriously resigned and powerless. And I can hear the early Christians say, "All of that happened for a reason. God's in charge. Pilate is but a puppet in God's theater plot." End of story? I am not so sure we properly honor Jesus' suffering by being so assured of its purpose. I am not so sure we properly honor other people's horror stories by assuming too quickly that, oh well, it is happening for a reason - the stage four cancers, the brain tumors, the bride whom I helped getting married yesterday, who spent eight years in intermittent surgeries to restore her face after she suffered third and fourth degree burns following an accident in the shower. And I can see her husband Joseph, a quiet, no-nonsense guy, respond to anyone saying it happened for a reason, "Tell me what's the reason my wife got her face burnt?"

I believe, a lot of times when people try to make sense of tragedy it is out of a desire for control, wanting to make sense of things, bringing order into chaos, which is, incidentally, God's job, see Genesis 1. Many times when people look back at tragedy in their lives, they will in fact at some point come to see that something happened for a reason or that a bad experience brought some form of blessing into their lives, despite the pain. But Jesus, the Jesus of Holy Week, teaches us something different: to respect the situation for what it is and not to try to find premature answers for the most painful and unexplainable things in life. You don't have to come up with answers, he is teaching us. The answers will come to you, sooner or later; sometimes much later. And that's alright. In the meantime, be human, dare to be vulnerable, dare to embrace the suffering, if you must. By doing so, you are in fact showing faith, faith in a God who somehow holds you in his hands when everything around you falls apart, including your own explanations. That kind of vulnerability is a sign of faith. Take it, not from me, but from one who went through hell and who would live to show his pierced hands and feet to his disciples.

Kate Bowler, by the way, is still alive and is still teaching at Duke. I think she would even call herself "blessed."

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. For this week, let us be attuned to the suffering of Christ and also the suffering of our brothers and sisters. **Amen.**