

Life ain't fair, have you noticed?

We get a hint of this in today's gospel, but even more so in the reading from the Book of Job, wisdom literature in narrative form. It's the story of a man named Job, "blameless and upright," "who feared God and turned away from evil." Here was a man who did everything right and had everything – sons and daughters, many servants, property enough for the thousands upon thousands of sheep, camels, and other livestock. Job had it all. Until he didn't.

One by one, everything comes crashing down – even his health and appearance; he's covered with "loathsome sores" from head to toe. His own wife tells him to "curse God and die."

The chapters leading up to today's passage describe Job's descent into unspeakable suffering. The phrase "the patience of Job" seems almost an understatement.

Just when it seems it can't get much worse, Job's "friends" show up to blame the victim. What did Job do to deserve this? they ask. Isn't all this a sign of God's punishment? Isn't it only fair?

Actually, Job thinks not. He pleads his case to the "friends" and to God. He points out that in fact the wicked often go unpunished, as he maintains his own innocence. Job challenges God to vindicate him, and give him (back) what he deserves. After all, it's only fair...

Near the end of the book, in today's passage, God finally speaks -- and it's not to cast a tie-breaking vote between the views of the friends or Job. God, speaking out of the whirlwind, answers with more questions.

"Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge?" God asks Job, and by extension, the friends. "Can you send forth lightnings? Satisfy the appetite of young lions? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God makes Godself known to Job out of the whirlwind.

Life feels like a whirlwind sometimes, doesn't it?
In these lingering, unfair days of the pandemic,

I've noticed some of us quoting a woman named Kate Bowler. I sent a saying of hers to the Regathering Task Force several weeks ago when it felt like we were hitting a wall of ever climbing out of this pandemic. I've heard others offer some of her prayers too, most recently at this week's staff meeting.

With all due respect, we should probably refer to her as Professor Kate Bowler, as she teaches the history of North American Christianity at Duke Divinity School. Among other things, she's an expert in the history of the "prosperity gospel" the notion that riches and status, living one's best life, are signs of God's blessing. Her book on the subject is called Blessed.

So she's smart and accomplished, respected in her field. She's devout, having devoted her life to educating those called to ministry. She married young, to a boy she met at camp during middle school. I've seen her interviewed and she's attractive, warm and witty. For all this she's still quite young -- having been born a few weeks after I graduated from college. (Ouch.)

And, at the age of 35 with a newborn son, she was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer and given two years to live. *The sooner you get used to the idea of dying the better*, a physician's assistant suggests soon after the diagnosis. Did I mention that life isn't fair?

That was about six years ago. After enduring a brutal clinical trial of immunotherapy, surgeries too numerous to mention, and more, she's still here and has managed to see her son start school and give the world two wonderful memoirs: Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved and, most recently, No Cure for Being Human: And Other Truths I Need to Hear. I'd highly recommend both. But not if you're looking to make Kate Bowler your squishy "inspirational" figure.

What I like about these books is that although they're her memoirs, they're really about all of us. I like that she uses her expertise in history to try and make sense of right now.

Unlike purveyors of the "prosperity gospel" -- or Job's friends, for that matter -- Kate Bowler doesn't believe that her predicament is a result of falling out of God's favor, of not being "blessed". Nor does she, like Job, expect her goodness and accomplishments to be her vindication. *"Good or bad, I will not get what I deserve."* she writes. *"Nothing will exempt me from the pain of being human."* Nothing will exempt us from that pain either.

There's no cure for being human.

And yet. There is God, in the whirlwind.

God here with us in the tedium and the whirlwind of this life.

"What," Kate Bowler writes, ***"if rich did not have to mean wealthy and whole did not have to mean healed?"***

What if being people of "the gospel" meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough."

After she seems to have arrived at some semblance of remission, she plans family trips, class reunions, and so many things she feared she'd never again experience.

Only, like the rest of us, to have it all cancelled by COVID.

All of us, all at once, lives suspended in midair. IT'S NOT FAIR.

Are we wasting precious days? Can we love extravagantly inside these numbered days?

How do we live now? These are fair questions.

I suspect that Kate Bowler knows better than to presume to answer for anyone else.

But here's part of her answer, generously shared:

"Someday we won't need to hope. Someday we won't need courage.

And, I might add, we won't have to worry about what's fair or what's not.

Time itself will be wrapped up with a bow, and God will draw us all into the eternal moment where there will be no suffering, no disease, no email.

In the meantime, we are stuck with our beautiful, terrible finitude...

We get divorced, waste our time, and break our own hearts.

We are cobbled together with the softest material, laughter and pets and long talks with old friends.

By God's unscrupulous love and by communities that give us a place to belong...

Our lives are not problems to be solved.

[In the whirlwind that is this life] ***we can have meaning and beauty and love, but nothing even close to resolution."***

So be it. Amen.

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Italics = quotations or close paraphrases from Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved (**green**), Random House, 2018; or No Cure for Being Human: And Other Truths I Need to Hear (**blue**), Random House, 2021; by Kate Bowler.