

# SERMON | 22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 | Mark 10:46-52 | October 24, 2021 | The Rev. Catherine Healy

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I was a seminary student when I first encountered the work of Kate Bowler.<sup>1</sup> Until 2015, she was best known as an up-and-coming religious historian. And then, at age 35, she was diagnosed with incurable, metastatic colon cancer.

She began to write about the struggle to make sense of her illness in the context of faith, and told the story of a neighbor who promised her husband that everything happens for a reason.

He picked up their toddler son and said, "Well, since there's a reason my wife is dying, I'd love to hear it."<sup>2</sup>

Six years later, after treatment successful enough to keep her alive but not quite enough to put her into remission, she remains balanced on the ledge between life and death. It is a miraculous healing, but not the kind that any of us hope for.

She writes about the breakdown of her imagined dichotomy between well and sick, or healthy and dying. Even if her treatment continues to work, if she lives a long and full life and watches her son grow up, there is no going back to being the person she was before cancer.

Her first memoir is called *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

This would not be a bad alternate title for the book of Job.

We reach today's Old Testament passage after a month of walking with Job through every kind of proof that bad things happen for no reason. He is a good and righteous man, and yet he loses his health, and his riches, and his family. And his friends say all the things that you hope your own friends won't say.

*You must have sinned to bring this kind of punishment upon yourself.*

*If you pray harder, God will heal you.*

*People get what they deserve.*

And still, somehow, Job manages to hold onto his faith.

He cries out to God, and he curses his own life, but he never curses God's name. And at the end of the story, it's easy to think that his faithfulness is rewarded.

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<sup>1</sup> Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, has written some fabulous books about the prosperity gospel movement, celebrity preachers' wives, and the landscape of American Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Kate Bowler, "Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

But the things Job has lost are things that you don't get back. He will always bear the scars of his disfigurement. And he will always bear the memory of all he has lost.

Kate Bowler describes the people who want to make sure she learns a spiritual lesson from her cancer, including one man who told her, "I hope you have a 'Job' experience." She writes: "I can't think of anything worse to wish on someone. God allowed Satan to rob Job of everything, including his children's lives. Do I need to lose something more to learn God's character?"<sup>3</sup>

But it's comforting to believe that suffering must happen, ideally to other people, for *some* reason. Maybe as a punishment or a lesson or a test.

*Anything* is a comfort compared to the terrifying possibility that tragedy strikes unpredictably, that it slices through the lives of all kinds of people without regard for character, and that it might therefore be coming, at any moment, for us.

The book of Job forces us to reckon with that possibility. But the truth is, we have to face it anyway. Doing all the right things is not enough to protect any of us from loss, pain, or death.

Knowing this, it can be a little hard to read the healing narratives of Jesus. Why do these miracles seem to happen so easily in the Gospels, when the same is not true for us?

But as unsatisfying as this story is to read on its own, the Gospel stories are never meant to be read on their own. Bartimaeus is a counterpoint to the disciples James and John, who just before this scene—in the passage we heard last week<sup>4</sup>—came to

Jesus with a favor to ask. And Jesus greets each of them, the desperate beggar and the favored disciples, with the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?"

James and John have an answer: They want to be exalted to a status where they can keep other people out. They want to be elevated above the other disciples, so that everyone will see how special they are.

To them, Jesus shrugs and says, "That is not mine to grant."

Not much later, James and John are part of the crowd trying to order Bartimaeus to shut up. But this doesn't deter Bartimaeus. It only makes him yell louder.

And he manages to get the attention of Jesus. He leaps to his feet. Maybe hands are guiding him forward, or maybe he's following the sound of Jesus' voice.

And Jesus asks, again: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus is, in many ways, the opposite of James and John. At least to the crowds who follow Jesus, his closest disciples are celebrities; this beggar is an outcast. He wasn't born blind, so no one around him has any doubt that his blindness is a punishment for something terrible he did. He's outside the economy. He's outside the *society*.

So Bartimaeus says: "My teacher, let me see again."

James and John want to keep others out of the circle. All Bartimaeus wants is to be welcomed in.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:35-45.

For him, the restoration of sight is not just a physical healing; it's a restoration of relationships, of his place in the community. He just wants a place in the crowd.

To him, Jesus says: "Go; your faith has made you well."

But Bartimaeus wasn't an outcast because there is something intrinsically wrong with blindness. He became an outcast for the same reason that Kate Bowler's neighbors now avoid her at parties—because he was a living reminder that our bodies are fragile, that tragedy could befall any one of us at any time.

He was cast out not because of his own sins, but because of the sins of the crowd.

We, gathered here, do not have Jesus' power of miraculous healing. Instead, Jesus has given to us the power to expand the circle. We can build a culture of radical hospitality, where all bodies and minds have a meaningful place. And we can build a culture of radical honesty, where we don't put up with stigma around any kind of illness or disability, so that each of us can trust in our place here and rely on help from others when we need it, as each of us inevitably will.

We can overcome the impulse, when we learn of someone's sickness or hospitalization, to ask "How did you sin?" and instead ask "How can I help?"

We are called to be imitators of Christ, who did not run away from human suffering; he ran toward it. And he did not hide from death; he was afraid, but still, he embraced it.

There's so much suffering around us that we can't control, but there is also so much that we can. Our

touch can't reverse blindness or cure cancer, but we are not called to be God. In times of crisis, we are called to be the brothers and sisters of Job, offering sympathy, comfort, and financial support. We are called to be the disciples surrounding Jesus, who should be the first to elevate the voices of the silenced.

I wish it were true that everything happens for a reason. Instead, I believe it's impossible to make meaning out of the randomness of human suffering. But that doesn't mean our lives are without meaning—far from it. Instead, our meaning is found in God's love for us, and our care for one another.