

Five years ago, less than a day after Kate Bowler—then a 35-year-old theologian and historian at Duke University—had major surgery to remove a handful of cancerous tumors in her abdomen, she found herself on a rampage in the hospital gift shop. With her IV pole in one hand, she shuffled into the store and began methodically removing stacks of book from the store shelf.

"I'd like to see the manager," she declared to the befuddled teenage cashier when she was done.

Moments later, the unsuspecting manager appeared: "Can I help you, ma'am?"

"Yes! Thank you." Kate replied. "I need you to know that at these books are not suitable to be sold in a hospital." Pointing to a pile of popular books by self-help prosperity gospel preacher Joel Osteen, Kate went on to explain to the manager: "The author is saying God will reward you with money and health if you have the right kind of faith...Normally, okay. I can handle this. But you can't sell this in a hospital. You can't sell this to *me*."

Pointing to another commercial success about "claiming one's healing using Bible verses," Kate stared down the manager and continued, "*This* one tells me that if I can unleash my positive thoughts I can get rid of the negativity in my life."¹

With the wounds of her surgery still fresh, Kate knew that all the positive thinking in the world couldn't eradicate her cancer or the conviction that somehow God had let this new mother down. And yet Kate also knew that as much as she scoffed at those books, she, like millions of other American Christians, had subscribed to that very belief for most of her life. After attending Bible camp every summer as a teen, earning graduate degrees in religion, landing her dream job as a professor of the history of American Christianity at Duke University, and marrying her equally faithful Mennonite high school sweetheart, she was pretty sure, in fact, that she *had* done her part to ensure her success and God's favor.

¹ Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human: And Other Truths I Need to Hear* (New York: Random House, 2021), 11-14.

Sure, she had seasons of darkness and suffering, including years of infertility and physical disability, but she was rather certain that God had been pleased with her work and had rewarded her just so.²

Now, in the face of a terminal diagnoses, that quid-pro-quo faith left her hanging by a thread.

All that she knew to be true was gone.

All she could do is ask why—

Why me?

Why now?

When the world comes crashing down, that's often the only question that remains for us, too:

Why?

Why won't you cure my wife?

Why won't you repair this marriage?

Why are so many people dying from a disease that people no longer seem to care about?

Why does it hurt so bad?

How dare you, God, make promises you don't seem to keep?

How dare you not tell us why, or how, or when it will get better?

Why, God, why?

Like walking down a forested road on a starless night, the realization that the God whom we may have worshipped and known for most of our lives now seems insufficient for the heartache or questions we face is disorienting and scary. Sometimes, it's all we can do not to walk away. And, sometimes we *do* walk away and call it quits on God and our own future.

That's certainly what Job wants to do today. All that remains after the death of his children, his vocation, his home, and his beloved are the ashes of the life he once knew and a few friends with really terrible advice: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

² Kate Bowler, "A Question of Faith," *Guideposts* (September 2018).

To the three of them if God hasn't shown up with an explanation by now, if Job's suffering hasn't come to an end, surely there's a perfectly valid reason for it. In between chapters 2 and 23—which is where we are today—Job's friends have laid out all kinds of reasons for Job's predicament:

Surely, Job was not as righteous as he thought.

Surely he missed a prayer or two.

Surely, he must have angered God.

It was their own prosperity Gospel à la ancient Judaism.

And as annoying as they are, who can blame his friends? Who wouldn't want a faith that offers a measure of certainty and logic? Do this and God will do that. But as Kate realized, as Job realized, and as the stories of our ancestors of faith in the Bible show, faith is not a transactional relationship. God is not a candy dispenser, Santa Claus, or Oprah yelling, "you get a car! And you get a car! And you get a car."

The Bible, my friends, is not a linear story of crime and punishment. It's a story of God offering to be in relationship with God's people and establishing a foundation for the flourishing of every creature. God, however, will not do the flourishing for us lest we become marionette puppets. All of our ancestors of faith—all of them, save Jesus, believed at some point they had God figured out only to discover that God is much grander and bigger than their imaginations can fathom.

But first, they all had to rumble and lament with their limited imaginations and expectations. So, if you find yourself questioning and unlearning what you thought to be true about God or Jesus, take heart—you are in the company of the saints—ordinary people who traversed through the heartaches of life—who have gone before you and found on the other side a faith that is richer, deeper, and more complex than before.

When the world comes crashing down, and everything we have known to be true gets thrown in the air and it can be hard to figure out if we're coming or going. We can do everything "right" and life can still fall apart. That doesn't mean that God is mad at us or punishing us or teaching us a lesson.

Things happen that we do not deserve. Things don't happen that we do deserve. Much of what happens defy words. And the truth is there will never be a satisfactory answer for suffering.

Life though is not a riddle to be cracked.

You are not a problem to be solved.

Faith is not something to which we arrive.

It's a journey we take, a journey with twists and turns.

It's suffering and beauty.

It's poisonous snakes and sparkling stars.

It's the final breath of a beloved and the fisted cry of a newborn baby.

Unlearning what we've known and experienced about God can be scary and unpredictable. But it's also the pathway to making space for and encountering a God whose vastness can't be contained and whose nearness and love can't be quantified—only behold and known.

That is what is what Job realized when God began to respond to him. [As David Roberts writes,] "God does not condemn Job. . . . But God also does not respond to Job's indictment. God just doesn't give him an answer. God doesn't try to explain it. God doesn't even contradict Job's accusations. Instead, God responds with beauty." That may seem counterintuitive, but God knows that "nothing answers suffering. But neither is [sic] suffering and grief the whole story of our lives and of the world. There is beauty and grace, and hope in the world, too, existing simultaneously, in paradox, side-by-side."³ And as Rachel Held Evans reminds us that "Scripture doesn't speak of people who *found* God. Scripture speaks of people who *walked* with God. [Faith and life are a] keep-moving, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other, who-knows-what's-next-deal, and you never exactly arrive."⁴ You only keep growing and evolving.

³ David Roberts, "What God and Job Learn from Each Other: Prophetic Grief Meets Prophetic Beauty," October 15, 2015, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/10/what-job-and-god-learn-from-each-other-prophetic-grief-meets-prophetic-beauty-a-homily/>, accessed October 7, 2021.

⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church Again* (Nashville :Thomas Nelson, 2015), 180.

After living with her terminal illness for over five years Kate Bowler is learning to find grace in this truth. She's also decided that once this pandemic is over she is going to return to the Batalha Monastery in Portugal, where, 10 years ago, she first encountered the wisdom of this truth. Centered around an extravagant courtyard and bordered with intricate stone hallways and archways, the Batalha Monastery is a hallmark of Portuguese Catholic architecture. An octagonal chapel with lavish ornamentation and vaulted ceilings sits at the far end of the compound.

As Kate made her way to the chapel on that first visit she heard an elderly man muttering, "'Oh, it's perfect. Oooohhh, it is absolutely perfect.'"

Wanting to see what the man was talking about, Kate made her way forward when a shadow inched across in front of her. "Alarmed, [she] looked up. A cloud passed overhead."

"Is this..." she began to ask.

"'It was never finished, dear.'" The old man told her with a smile. "'Isn't it wonderful?'"

"The man gestured up, and where the ceiling should have been, there was only open sky. Seven kings had overseen the rise of this monument and had buried their dynasty in its walls. Yet none lived to finish it."

The old man went on to explain to her, "'The story goes that the plans...became so drawn out that eventually the idea of finishing it was simply abandoned. But it's much better that way.'"

Dumbfound, Kate asked, "What do you mean?'"

"'Don't you see? It's us! I can't imagine a more perfect expression of this life...I came all this way to see it. We're never done, dear. Even when we're done, **we're never done.**'"⁵

⁵ Bowler, *No Cure For Being Human*, 194-7. Emphasis added.

So, it is with our journey of faith, belief, doubt, wrestling, and God:
messy,
glorious,
complicated,
beautiful,
...and our path Home.

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