

## THE BLESSING OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

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Mark 9:2-9  
February 11, 2018

This past week a new book has come out by author Kate Bowler. Kate is an American Church History professor at Duke Divinity School, and up until recently her writings have been on the topic of the Prosperity Gospel. If you are unfamiliar with the Prosperity Gospel, it is, to put it succinctly, the idea that a person can know if they've been blessed by God if they have received the thing they've asked for. If you have ever heard a sermon by Texas pastor Joel Osteen, then you have heard the Prosperity Gospel. The underlying belief—that God wants good things for us—is Biblically sound and generally agreed upon, but where the Prosperity Gospel differs from most theological ideas is that it believes that we have the ability to know what is good for us, and that it is God's job to act upon our request. The critique being that this creates an image of God as a genie who grants wishes. Having grown up in a Mennonite community, Kate found the Prosperity Gospel so interesting because it was so foreign from her experience. In the Mennonite community, God was known through the love of each other, thus making community, and specifically the peace within the community, the greatest good. As Kate began to study the Prosperity Gospel, she realized how different it was from the Mennonites, not only in the role of God, but in the role of community. In the Prosperity Gospel, the believer is encouraged to pray for what *they* want, not what's best for the community. So prayers for lots of money, nice cars, and big houses are common. And, the Prosperity Gospel believes, you'll know that you've been blessed by God when you have a lot of money, nice cars, and a big house. The corollary of this is, however, that if you have not received a lot of money, nice cars, and a big house, then you have simply not been praying well enough or hard enough.

The other litmus test for God's blessing in the Prosperity Gospel is one's health. Which is to say, if you are sick, or a loved one is sick, and you pray for your or their health, and they get better, you have been blessed by God, but if they do not get better that means you did not pray well enough or hard enough. This is the sentiment that Kate Bowler wrote her book in response to, noting that when someone follows the Prosperity Gospel, and their loved one dies, their grief is then compounded by shame.

As I mentioned, Kate Bowler is a professor of American Church History, and her research has been studying the history and development of the Prosperity Gospel. She confessed in her book that, to a certain degree, she placed herself in this camp. She had known God's favor, a common expression in the Prosperity Gospel church, and by their standards, felt blessed by God.

Until 2015, when, at the age of 35, Kate was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. After months of doubling over in pain and being told by doctors that she just needed some antacids, she finally received the accurate diagnosis, and it was much worse than she had imagined. The cancer was so toxic by the time they found it that she had to go into surgery the next day. Kate noted in her book that the best part of studying and then working at a divinity school is that she and her family were, as the word spread of her surgery, completely surrounded by pastors. They

held a vigil at the Duke Divinity School chapel, where people took turns praying, such that there was always someone praying for her, around the clock, the whole time that she was in the hospital. And they took turns waiting with her family at the hospital, as well. Kate found great strength and comfort in their unrelenting love and care through that very difficult time.

Kate recovered from surgery to learn that only now did she have a 50% chance of living. She might live through the next year, and she might not. There was no way to say.

At this point, about two years ago, Kate wrote an OpEd piece for the *New York Times*, which you may have read because it was hugely popular, and soon Kate was hearing from hundreds of thousands of people. She wrote about her cancer, her journey thus far, and the time when her neighbor came to the door to drop off a casserole and said to Kate's husband, "you know, everything happens for a reason." Kate's husband replied, "I'd love to hear it... I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying."

And so people wrote to her. Some were atheists, trying to convince Kate to give up on trying to make meaning out of all of this. Some were, she imagines, trying to make her feel better by pointing out all the great things in her life. Others were seemingly defending the notion that everything happens for a reason, maybe to try and help Kate and her husband, or maybe because they needed it to be true.

But in Kate's book, which is called Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I've Loved, she refuses to believe that this pain she and her family are suffering is at God's hand. Freeing herself from the Prosperity Gospel, she doesn't see her continued illness as a lack of blessing from God or a sign of a poor prayer life. She believes that she is very blessed to have family and friends who will do everything they can to help her. And above all, she believes in God's unadulterated and unconditional love.

She writes, "it seemed too odd and too simplistic to say what I knew to be true—that when I was sure I was going to die, I didn't feel angry, I felt loved" and she added that when all was said and done "I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God."

At the moment that was, by all measures, the lowest point in her life, she felt uplifted by the love and presence of God.

In this morning's Gospel reading, we find the disciples Peter, James, and John, ascending a mountaintop with Jesus six days after Peter declares his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus responds by saying that he must "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31)

Looking back on this 2000 years later, we have lost the significance of what the disciples are hearing. We assume that they are hearing what we hear: that Jesus was suffer, die, but rise again in glory everlasting. But here is what they heard: everything you've ever thought you knew is wrong.

Just like a person who spends their whole life believing that God has blessed them because they are healthy has to reconcile their trust in God with a terminal illness, the disciples have to come to terms with the fact that the Messiah whom they had been waiting for—whom all of their community had been waiting for, for generations—was going to be *nothing* like they expected. They had long been waiting for a new King David who would destroy their enemies and ensure the safety of their people. Who would be a warrior, someone who could take on the Romans and win. Someone who would restore the Kingdom of Israel and show the world the supreme power of God. But what Jesus is telling them is that yes, he is the Messiah, but no, that's not what is going to happen. Jesus' victory will be like nothing they can currently imagine.

Have you ever had a long-held belief that, because of new truths that came to light, you found you had to suddenly no longer believe? It may not be as up-ending as having to consider what it means to be blessed by God when facing a terminal illness, and it is most likely not having to reconfigure your understanding of the Messiah, yet, maybe you held a belief for a long time, maybe it was even handed down to you by previous generations, maybe it was at the very core of how you understand yourself, or the world, or God—or maybe how you understand all three—and then something happens, a moment, a conversation, a realization, and there starts to be a crack in your belief, and the crack grows, and then, before you know it, the belief is crumbling to pieces. Maybe you have never had this experience, but if you have, then you know how the disciples felt as Jesus said to them that the Messiah must “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

And six days later, the Gospel tells us, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, and they went to the mountaintop. And suddenly, Jesus was transfigured before them; his clothes were dazzling white. With him were Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets. And the disciples were terrified. Which is understandable. The whole scene would be overwhelming. Any one part of this scenario would be a lot to take in, but together, it would be overwhelming.

That is, unless we pause for a moment to consider the stories of Elijah and Moses and their mountaintop experiences. Elijah, you may remember, was a prophet in the time of King Ahab, who was married to the notorious idolater Queen Jezebel. After Elijah's harsh criticism of Jezebel and her worship of false gods, she set out to kill Elijah, who then fled for his life to a cave in a mountaintop. It was here that Elijah felt God's assurance in the “still, small voice” of God. Moses also had a traumatic experience with the royalty of this day, but for Moses it was the Pharaoh of Egypt who had enslaved the Israelites. After being freed by God and led into the wilderness where the people hungered and thirst, and complained to Moses that they were all going to die there, Moses also went to the mountaintop to speak with God. While there, Moses grew so close to God that when he came back down to the people, his face shown so brightly that he had to wear a veil to shield the people from the brightness of his face, which had become a reflection of the glory of God.

Jesus, like Moses, shines in radiant glory, and Jesus, like Elijah, is confirmed by the majestic voice of God. But unlike with Moses and Elijah, whose encounters with God were for their own well-being, Jesus' transfiguration is not for Jesus, but for the disciples. For when God speaks, he speaks to Peter, James, and John.

God declares: “This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!” As much as to say to the disciples that while they were hoping for a king, they would be given a son, while they were longing for a warrior, they would come to know a beloved, while they were hoping to march behind, they were being called to “listen to.” Jesus was not going to be the Messiah they were expecting; Jesus would be more than they could have ever imagined.

Kate Bowler was expecting to live a long and healthy life. And who’s to say? Maybe she will. But either way, she knows that she is blessed. Not because she’s been given everything that she expects and wants, but because she knows that God is with her.

The disciples were anticipating the Messiah that they were taught to expect. While this isn’t how their story went, they were still blessed. If Jesus’ transfiguration taught them nothing else, it showed them that they were following none other than God’s beloved.

In this room alone, there may be more things that we want or expect than can be counted. The Gospel account of the Transfiguration offers us this gift: like Peter, James, and John, we may not live the life we set out live, but we are blessed; wherever life takes us, even to the heights of the earth, we are in the presence of the love of God.