

“Plans and Promises”  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Baptism of the Lord

January 8, 2023  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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As you heard during our announcements this morning, we are very excited to welcome Dr. Kate Bowler as our Heritage Lecture speaker in less than 2 weeks, on Thursday, January 19.

In preparation for Dr. Bowler’s visit, both this morning and next Sunday, I will take an idea from each of her best-selling books, and preach about that idea.

The first best-seller was *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)*. We’ve got it in our church library. The book addresses a central question in the Christian faith:

Does everything happen for a reason?

Are the events of our lives all part of a divine plan, preordained and scripted by the hand of the Almighty?

And Dr. Bowler’s answer to this question is an emphatic no.

It was a Stage IV cancer diagnosis that got her thinking more deeply about all this.

As she writes in her book:

“Married in my twenties, a baby in my thirties, I won a job at my alma mater straight out of graduate school. I felt breathless with the possibilities...It was certainty, plain and simple...God had a worthy plan for my life in which every setback would also be a step forward...”

And then she writes:

“I don’t believe that anymore.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Bowler first wrote publicly about her cancer diagnosis in a guest essay for *The New York Times*, back in 2016. As she describes, both in that essay and in her book—while she was still in the hospital, following surgery, a neighbor knocked on the door to their house to drop off a casserole, and told Dr. Bowler’s husband that everything happens for a reason.

In the neighbor’s mind, this was surely meant to come across as a word of comfort.

But it was absolutely the wrong thing to say.

Dr. Bowler’s husband replied, “I’d love to hear it.”

“Pardon?” said the neighbor, startled at his reply.

“I’d love to hear the reason my wife is dying,” he replied, and that very quickly ended the conversation.<sup>2</sup>

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But it did not end the ongoing conversation that Kate Bowler has had with so many people across this country, through subsequent books and articles and podcasts and speaking engagements.

And I’m grateful to Dr. Bowler, not only for addressing this subject so publicly, but doing so in such a thoughtful and vulnerable way, and for bringing a THEOLOGICALLY SOUND picture of God to thousands upon thousands of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)*, New York: Random House, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. This story is also told by Kate Bowler, in “Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

So...the topic of this morning's sermon is, I hope, straightforward even if it's not simple:

If everything DOES NOT happen according to a divine plan, what does that say about God?

And how do we live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ if RANDOMNESS and bad luck are simply a part of the deal, realities that are not caused by God, nor prevented by God, but facts of life that no one can avoid?

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Now...before going any farther, I do want to acknowledge that there are biblical passages suggesting that God DOES make plans.

How many of you remember that beautiful verse from Jeremiah, chapter 29?

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Even our Gospel reading this morning can be heard as if God has a detailed and scripted plan.

Our text is Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus. And Matthew tells us that when Jesus showed up at the Jordan River long ago, John was reluctant to baptize Jesus.

He thought it should be the other way around.

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

It sounds like Jesus is telling John—this is part of God’s plan.  
That’s why you need to baptize me.

But I think there’s another word that better describes what God is up to, not only in the baptism of Jesus, but also in our baptisms—and that word is PROMISE.

Not plan...but promise.

What is it that parents do when they have their child baptized?  
They make a series of promises, right?  
To live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to their child...

And what do you do when you stand at a baptism and answer the question from the elder who assists that day?

When you say that you will guide and nurture that child by word and deed, with love and prayer, to help that child know and follow Christ...is it merely a suggestion?

Are you saying—eh, if I can, I’ll get around to it?  
No, no...you’re making a promise.

Or take the words that are spoken by God to Jesus at his baptism.  
Do you remember what God says?  
“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The first part of that—this is my Son, the Beloved—it comes from Psalm 2, a Psalm read at the coronation of a king in Israel.

The second part—with whom I am well-pleased—it’s an echo from the first verses of our Old Testament text for today, Isaiah 42. And later on in that same chapter, the prophet writes:

“I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness...  
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
 a light to the nations...”

Do you know what the word covenant means?

It means promise.

When Isaiah wrote those words, he was referring to Israel—Israel would be God’s covenant, God’s promise to the nations. But centuries later, the early church understood Jesus to be the new covenant, the new promise that God was making.

Do you remember what Jesus said on the last night with his disciples?

He held up a cup and said, “...this is...the new covenant, which is poured out for many...”

The early church understood Jesus’ life not so much as the next step in carefully scripted plan, but as the fulfillment of promises God had made long ago.

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Do you see the distinction?

If God is in the planning business, it suggests that whatever happens, including inexplicable suffering—it’s all divine handiwork. Even Jesus refutes that view at different times in his ministry.

But if God is in the PROMISE-MAKING business, it suggests that God has made a covenant with us to redeem suffering, to defeat evil, and

the clearest sign of that promise is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So...where does that leave us?

Not with explanations for why all the hardships and harrowing events of our lives take place.

That's one of the things I value about Dr. Bowler's approach: the restraint that she exercises when it comes to what we know and don't know about God and God's world.

But if we do believe in a God who makes and fulfills promises, a God who interacts within the world without causing all events of the world...then the question for us becomes something like this:

### **What does it look like to live a life that's shaped by the promises of God?**

Three things:

#1: REMEMBERING....

Remember your baptism—that's what the Reformer Martin Luther said 500 years ago. Remember the promises that God makes at your baptism, to claim you as God's own and to never let you go.

In one of the congregations that I previously served, there were a number of WWII veterans, and one of those veterans was a pilot—he flew missions into enemy territory in WWII.

On one of those missions, his plane was hit, and he was going to have to land the plane on foreign soil. He did not know whether he would be able to land the plane smoothly, did not know whether he would live or whether he would die...

He told me once, as he was describing that terrifying moment, when he was sitting in the cockpit trying to guide his wounded plane safely to the ground—he told me he heard a voice:

I AM WITH YOU.

There was no one else in the plane with him.  
There was no radio communication coming to him.

He said he heard those words...and he knew.  
He knew it was God, talking to him.

Somehow, he survived the landing—he said he got lucky because he was able to land in Switzerland, where there was 3-4 feet of snow on the ground. That snow kept the plane from bursting into flames, and it saved his life. He eventually made it back to the United States, but he never forgot what he heard in the cockpit that day.<sup>3</sup>

I am with you...it is God's promise, not just to WWII aviators, but to all of us.

REMEMBER.

Remember that God is with you, and nothing can separate God's love from you. That's the first thing it means to live a life shaped by the promises of God.

The second thing it means is REFLECTING.  
By reflecting, I don't mean an INWARD thing.  
I mean an OUTWARD THING.

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Bob Lucas for sharing this story with me. More details can be found in an interview given to the Lakewood Advocate, Dallas, TX, at [WWII vets: They changed the world - Lakewood/East Dallas \(advocatemag.com\)](http://www.advocatemag.com).

We are called to reflect, to the world around us, the promises of God in all that we say and do.

Let me get at it like this.

Years and years ago, a seminary professor started attending a church that was located nearby the seminary, and many of his colleagues also attended worship there.

It was a congregation that really valued intellectual rigor in their sermons, and sometimes this was a good thing, and sometimes it was a detrimental thing. Sometimes, in the midst of intellectual loftiness, CLARITY got sacrificed in that pulpit.

In fact, one long-time member—not one of the professors—  
one member of that church once put it like this:

“I haven’t understood a sermon that’s been preached here in 25 years,” this church member said. “But I’ll tell you one thing. I’d never leave this church.”

Every Monday night, he and some other members went to visit a nearby prison for teenagers who were incarcerated...a juvenile detention center.

“Sometimes we play ball with the kids.”

“Sometimes we have a little Bible study. Most of all we just get to know them as people. I started doing this because Christians are supposed to do things like that, but now I find that I get a lot from it myself.”

And then he said this:



**“I have found that you cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, you find they are true, every [single] one.”<sup>4</sup>**

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We cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if we live them, they will be true—if we reflect them, they will be seen...  
every single one.

Do you believe that?

I do.

And I know you do too, because I’ve seen you do it.

By forgiving others, as God has forgiven you.

By being generous with others, as God has promised to be generous with you.

And we also do it with our restraint.

By not giving friends and neighbors an explanation for their suffering, but by walking through it with them, by standing by their side in silence and solidarity, by weeping when they weep and rejoicing when they rejoice.

So.....remembering, reflecting...and the third thing I think the promises of God are about is REDEEMING.

This is not something we do.

It’s what God has already done for us.

And we hold onto that knowledge, that faith, deep in our souls.

God has not promised to prevent our pain.

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<sup>4</sup> As told by Thomas G. Long, *The Senses of Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

God has not promised a life with a certain amount of years.  
God has not promised to keep chance or randomness from  
interfering in our lives.

What God has promised to do is redeem it all.  
To somehow, in the end, make things right.

And I have no clue how God will do it.  
But in the end, that's what the life and death and resurrection of  
Jesus Christ mean to me.

Not only that we are called to reflect Christ's love in this life.  
Not only that after death, God grants us new life.

But also that there is an eternal righteousness that is part of God's  
very being—and that righteousness is what God promises for all of  
God's creation.

Do you remember what Jesus said to John at the Jordan?

“...it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jesus isn't just speaking of that day in the Jordan.

He is speaking of the consummation of all days, the day in which  
God promises to make all things right.

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I'm reminded of a story I heard a pastor tell years ago,  
about two elderly women in his congregation,  
Etta and Sylvia.

They were sisters, very close, talked to each other every day.  
And as they aged, both of them became ill.

Etta was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and was placed in a home for people who live with this terrible disease.

Sylvia got sick as well.

Her illness was cancer, and she went to the hospital for treatment.

The pastor would go to visit both sisters, and when he visited, they would always ask the same question:

Sylvia would say, "Reverend, what's the news about Etta today?"

And Etta would say, "Pastor, what's the news about Sylvia today?"

"Oh, not too bad," the pastor would respond.

"Oh, she's holding up ok."

Eventually, though, Sylvia died.

The cancer was too much.

They had a funeral for her, and at the funeral, they announced the promises of God, and the power of God, and sang songs about the Resurrection.

Etta, the sister with Alzheimer's, sat at the funeral in her wheelchair, and at the reception after the funeral, the pastor went over to Etta and said, "I want you to know that I'm praying for you."

"Thank you," she replied.

Then Etta looked up and said, "What's the news from Sylvia today?"

The pastor said his mind went blank.

What do you say in a situation like that?

"And then," he said, "the Spirit gave me the words.

I told her the Gospel truth:  
“The news from Sylvia today is good.  
Very, very good.”<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> This story was told by Tom Long at the Festival of Homiletics preaching conference in Nashville, Tennessee, 1999. I do not remember if he was the pastor referenced, or if he simply knew the pastor who told this story.