

“No Cure for Being Human”
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I hope our antiphonal reading of Psalm 30 allowed your ears to hear just how many contours of the human emotional landscape are traversed in a mere 12 verses of scripture. Many and varied are the struggles of faith framed within this one psalm. There is the exaltation of knowing that we have been delivered from a hopeless situation, the wonder at how things that seem so sinister can turn to blessing, the chagrin of knowing we had been overcontent and haughty, and the bewilderment at seeing how things can turn on a dime. But there is more. There is also a self-affirming, winking prayer for help, quick desperation, and utter joy dancing in praise. In other words, in twelve verses we encounter very real, very human expressions of exaltation, wonder, embarrassment, astonishment, playfulness, anguish, and delight. If there is one subtext for Psalm 30, it might be this: there is no cure for being human.

This idea, which I made the title of my sermon, is actually the title of a forthcoming book by Kate Bowler, a church historian at Duke Divinity school, who, at the age of 35, was unexpectedly diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. Kate wrote the New York Times best-selling memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*, in which she tells the story of her struggle to understand the personal and intellectual dimensions of the American belief that all tragedies are tests of character.

Kate explains that she used to think that she picked her life. She wants folks to know that she fully recognizes the arrogance of how that sounds. A book she read about how class informs our perspectives on life caused her to rethink what she thought she knew. In particular for her, she learned that middle class folk, as a whole, perceive themselves as choosers, good navigators of institutions, “like able to find a way and be cheerful,” she explains. Kate learned that far from having a personality, she recognized that she was just middle class. She imagined that she could pick her life because she was trying to get somewhere. For example, she hadn’t imagined that she’d be able to go to a good college and so she thought she was like, “scrapping that out.” And then when she was at that college, she was thought she was trying to get into a different master’s program and then so on and so on and so on. In other words, she thought that she was the kind of person who could pick her job, pick the number of kids that she had, pick her economic status, pick her friends, pick her Starbucks drink.

But then all the things that happened to her came around. Then she was the person who had cancer. Then she was the person who was probably going to die that year. Then she was the person who had no control over her money because all of it was going to be eaten up by a health care system that bankrupts people for suffering in this country. Then she realized that you don’t get to pick your friends, your trips, your life, and that she wasn’t actually a chooser at all. She was just really lucky.

Kate muses: “You don’t really know you’re lucky until you’re not anymore.” She chuckles when she says this and admits that it was much easier for her to believe that she was a set of choices, because if she believed that, then she got to believe that she deserved what she got. “But when the bad things happen to you,” Kate says, “you realize I don’t want to live in a world in which I deserve what I get or that anybody else’s suffering means that I get to, like, pull out the tally card and add it up for them. It turns out that very little will be fair. So much of it can be beautiful and meaningful, but almost nothing will be because we picked it.”

By the way, in her next book, *No Cure for Being Human (and Other Truths I Need to Hear)*, which comes out this fall, Kate will be exploring how it’s hard to give up on the feeling that the life you want is just out of reach. A beach body by summer. A trip to Disneyland around the corner. A promotion on the horizon. Everyone wants to believe that they are headed toward good, better, best. But what happens when the life you hoped for is put on hold indefinitely?

I don’t know how this is hitting you. I know it rings very real and true for me. Perhaps your body is aging in ways you would never choose. Maybe someone you love is becoming an entirely different person than they were in their youth. Maybe you are tired and disappointed and a little bit over it all already.

Rather than give in to our modern “best life now” advice industry, which offers us exhausting positivity as it tries to convince us that we can out-eat, out-learn and out-perform our humanness, can we, like Kate, like the psalmist, accept that there is joy and mourning in each stage of life? In the midst of a culture that tells us that anything is possible, can we make peace with our limitations and those of the people around us? Can we accept that there is a time for everything and that the fluctuations of our spirit are part of being human?

Can we, in other words, find our own spiritual lives contained within the space of Psalm 30, which is probably less like a map of our condition and more of a cubist painting, simultaneously showing side, front, and bottom views of our human face and all the faces that show up within the one, united yet diverse body of Christ.

The call of Psalm 30 is to not give up seeking God through the changeable rhythms of joyous praising and bitter wrestling. The challenge of the Psalm is the way it shows us that faith is lived in a dance of mourning and rejoicing—a dance that is by turns brutal and lyrical, and that belief means alternately challenging and submitting to the One whose power to save cannot be bounded by our expectations.

There is another gift to finding our rhythms in the rhythm of Psalm 30. Psalm 30, for all the ways that it shows us the full breadth and width and height and depth of our humanity, can also help us to accept the world as it really is: to be able to look at those around us with clear eyes and allow the truth of things to make a soft heart in us.

Might we dare to pray: Lord, show us the beauty and pain of life itself. Regardless of whether we believe it is convenient.

We live in a world that likes to tell us everything is possible. But all of us will have or have had a moment—if not an entire season—of undoing. We will lose or have lost things we can't get back. We live inside fragile bodies and lives filled with limitations. Our restlessness and desire for good, better, best will fail to tell us this truth: that there is no formula to a finished life.

These are challenging thoughts—not only to accept but much more so to embody in our lives. I think that is part of what can make it hard for us to truly enter into the power and transparent language of Psalm 30. For example, in verses 8-9, the psalmist finds themselves in such a hard spot that essentially all they feel they can do is to bargain with God, as bizarre as that might sound to us.

To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:
9 “What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?

The psalmist references the Pit, otherwise known as Sheol, which, in Hebrew thinking, was a quiet, dark, subterranean world inhabited by the deceased, and not to be conflated with many modern notions of Hell. They are trying to describe themselves as in a place profoundly *below* the thriving, pulsing world of the living. In Sheol, the psalmist would be separated from God and unable to praise God because of the silence that characterizes the underworld. In other words, the psalmist find their suffering to be so bad that it has pushed them to the extreme limit of human existence, a position virtually indistinguishable from death. In this place of extreme suffering all they find they can do is to try and bargain with God. “God, if you want me to praise you, then spare my life.”

There is a legend told within the annals of church history about St. Teresa of Avila, who during the Thirty Years' War was removing dead bodies from the battlefield on an oxcart. In the midst of her work, it began to stream with rain, and quickly the fields became thick with mud. She could barely move the cart. She is reported to have shaken her fist at the heavens and said, “No wonder you don't have any more friends, if you treat them like this!”

The intimacy of the psalmist with God, of St. Teresa with God, is radically unbound by conventional piety. Both the psalmist and Teresa recognize that there is no cure for being human. And in that very humanness they also know that the created purpose for humans is to praise God. We were created to give God worship—even the kind that comes from bargaining—in and through all that comes our way.

And this is precisely where some Christians falter. In a desire to wrap life up with a neat bow of cause and effect, some have done much like what one neighbor did to Kate's husband shortly after she received her deadly diagnosis: knocked on their door only to tell him that there must be a reason. "'I'd love to hear it,' Kate's husband said. 'Pardon?' the neighbor said, startled. 'I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying,' he said.

The neighbor wasn't trying to sell a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos.

Maybe Psalm 30 wants us to know that there is much less order in the chaos than we think and much more opportunity to be fully human, fully committed to living wide open: open to life as it really is and God's love, which cannot be brooked by even our trips down into the Pit. There is no cure for being human. So let us then embrace our call, in our very fragile humanness, to praise and give thanks to God, not for all things but in all things. Amen.