

## What do you need?

Sermon 105 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 27, 2021  
Job 2:11-13

In 2018, Kate Bowler published a book called *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)*. The book was a deviation from her typical writings because this book is more of a memoir. Bowler, a History of Christianity professor at Duke University was more accustomed to studying theologies and religious practices of other people – particularly those who attended and led megachurches in the prosperity gospel tradition. But this project, the one that would become a national best-seller and land her in conversation with people like Oprah Winfrey, was far more personal.

Three years before the book was published, Bowler, who was in her mid-thirties at the time, was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. With no cure available, Bowler wrestles with her own mortality as she considers her life, her marriage, and her baby boy after hearing this catastrophic news. The book is a powerful story, doused in humor and deep spiritual reckoning, of Bowler's journey as she struggles to reconcile the idea of a loving, all-powerful God with the most difficult pieces of human existence.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

It is one of the oldest spiritual questions. Countless books, dissertations, and doctrinal statements have been published on the subject. There's a whole area of theological study dedicated to it; the fancy word for it is *theodicy*. But despite all the lip service given to this ancient question, the most authentic response we can give is simple: *we don't know*.

Even the book of Job, which is the quintessential narrative on the subject, struggles to answer the question of *why*. As God talks to Satan, the two seem to be using Job as the subject of their divine gamble about human devotion. Satan argues that humans are only faithful to God in the good times, and given struggle and pain, they would turn and curse God. In an effort to prove Satan wrong, God allows Satan to send death, illness, and struggle to Job. In the conversation between the two, God says to Satan: *[Job] still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason (2:3)*.

It is one of the greatest mysteries of faith, one that plagues all of us at one time or another, as we deal with life and death, of sin and sorrow, of brokenness and the less glamorous realities of our human condition.

There are just some things we do not understand. There are experiences and struggles that cannot be explained. Things happen, terrible, hard things, and we never know why... at least this side of heaven.

Perhaps this is why the phrase: *Everything happens for a reason*, can have such a sting to it when it pours out of friends' lips in moments of struggle and sorrow. Despite its popularity amongst well-wishers and friends who are genuinely trying to figure out how to be present

in the midst of pain, the truth is, it doesn't help. In fact, it is on Kate Bowlers (very helpful) list of things *not* to say when showing up to comfort a friend.

The first Appendix to her best-seller is titled: *Absolutely Never Say This to People Experiencing Terrible Times: A Short List*.

1. "Well, at least..." Whoa. Hold up there. Were you about to make a comparison? At least it's not... what? Stage V cancer? Don't minimize.
2. "It's going to get better. I promise" Well, fairy godmother, that's going to be a tough row to hoe when things go badly.
3. "God needed an angel." This one makes God look bad among other theologically problematic realities...

According to Bowler, "the only thing worse than saying [*everything happens for a reason*] is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer," she writes, "Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons," she continues. "When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason."<sup>1</sup>

Bowler doesn't allow us to sit in our feelings of helplessness in the face of struggle, however, for all that Appendix 1 tells us *not* to do, Appendix 2 provides a short list of things we *can* and *should* do when people we love are experiencing terrible times.

1. Show up.
2. Tell your friend something you respect, admire, or love about them... without making it sound like a eulogy.
3. Let them know that you are aware of how hard things are, but don't ask for all the latest updates. Ask about some other aspect of their life. The struggle is not the sum of who they are, even in the most difficult moments.
4. Ask if you can give a hug. Sometimes struggle makes us feel less than human. Hugs – and any kind of basic human touch – can go a long way.
5. Listen and affirm the difficulty of the moment with a statement like: *Oh my friend, that sounds so hard.*

(and finally...)

6. Be quiet. "The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote [in] with his policy: 'Show up and [shush]'"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)*. 2018. Kindle Edition. p.170.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 175. \*changed "Show up and shut up" to "Show up and shush" for congregational use.

Maybe these words of advice sound a bit blunt or cynical because several of them fly in the face of our cultural practices. Maybe we have heard some of the phrases on the “Do Not Say” list. Maybe we have spoken them in moments when we didn’t know what else to say.

Regardless of our history with the words on these two lists, the last piece of advice: *Show up and Shush* sounds an awful lot like the call of the text in focus today.

As Job’s suffering grows, three of his friends leave their homes and set out to make a visit. At first, they set out to console and comfort him; but then they saw him from a distance and barely even recognized him.

Grief and trauma do that to us. They change us in ways that are often visible on the outside. Whether it is because of higher stress, change in diet, lack of sleep, or a side effect of prescribed medical treatment our bodies so often tell the stories our words cannot begin to summarize. So the fact that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar see Job and barely recognize him comes as no surprise. He bears the scars of his grief. What is remarkable, however, is that the friends are wise enough to change course. They shift gears from consolation to solidarity.

Whereas they set out to cheer Job up, they went to where he was, they saw the gravity of his position, and they joined him in his grief. The friends raised their voices and wept, they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. These were the motions of grief, the embodiment of pain. These were exactly the same motions we would have expected Job to be going through, but here, his friends are doing it with him, sharing in the dance of loss and grief.

Then, after joining in the mourning, the friends sit with Job, on the ground. For seven days and nights, they sit in silence, keeping vigil with their friend.

It was an ancient way of “showing up and shushing,” as Kate Bowler would say.

While some would argue the book of Job is more confusing than helpful, that it paints a negative picture of a God who would allow a faithful man such as Job to lose his family, his farm, and his health for no other reason than to prove the point to Satan; I would suggest that while this text may not help us with the theodicy question... while it does not give us an adequate answer as to why terrible things happen to all kinds of people... it does give us some beautiful examples of what friendship, love, and solidarity look like.

They go to their friend, leaving behind their places of comfort. They see that his grief has overwhelmed him such that he is almost beyond recognition. They mourn with him, taking on his pain as if it were their own. And they sit with him, in silence, for days and days on end... they sit, as long as it takes.

Dr. Jamil Zaki is a professor of psychology at Stanford University in California where he leads the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab. There, he and his students study physiological

patterns and changes associated with things like kindness, empathy, and compassion. He defines empathy in three categories: emotional, cognitive, and empathic concern. These three categories describe how we feel the feelings of others, how we understand and make sense of them, and how we are led to act based on the perceived needs of others. His research discovers that our brain tissue expands and grows in areas of the brain associated with kindness when we practice empathy with and toward others. And, the more we practice it, the better we get at it. He invites his students to engage in empathy exercises intended to grow and strengthen these parts of the brain. Exercises range from starting their days with loving-kindness meditations to reading fiction novels where the protagonist is someone who is very different from us. These kinds of practices, Dr. Zaki claims, lead to stronger empathy muscles, more kindness, and greater cooperation and acceptance across lines of difference.<sup>3</sup>

It turns out proximity to others helps us understand them; and understanding leads to empathy. And, the more we practice empathy, the more empathetic we become. It's like going to the gym to strengthen our physical muscles. At first it seems awkward and difficult, but over time, it gets easier. Then it becomes second nature.

I listened to Dr. Jamil Zaki talk about his research on a podcast this week and as he spoke, I couldn't help but think about Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. I don't imagine that the concept of empathy and empathic concern were a part of their reality in the ancient Near East; but their actions certainly do seem empathetic to me. Do they not?

Who could imagine better friends than they? Willing to leave their places of comfort to go and find Job where he was, to meet him *as he was*, to cry out in pain *with* him, to tear their robes *just like him*, and to sit on the ground *beside* him.

In other words, they did what is perhaps the best thing to do in moments of crisis, pain, and struggle: show up and shush.

You know, I wonder if God gets a bad rep in the book of Job because we only see God at work through the dialogue with Satan. Who's to say that God didn't send the three friends, calling them out of their own homes, setting their feet along the path straight to where Job was struggling, and giving them the wisdom to listen, to mourn, and to enter into sacred solidarity with their friend? Who's to say God didn't do that?

And who's to say that God doesn't still do that now?

If we were to keep reading, we would see that Job's friends did eventually open their mouths and their words were akin to the things on Bowler's first list, the one offering advice about *what not to say*. To their credit, they did not have access to the book, or the list. They were just human beings offering what they had to offer.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://armchairexpertpod.com/pods/jamil-zaki?rq=Jamil>

Maybe their words came from their own experiences? Maybe they were repeating things others had said to them? Or maybe they were just trying to make sense of it all in hopes that *they* wouldn't find themselves in Job's position one day. Maybe they just didn't know what else to say and the silence had grown so long that they were beginning to feel awkward and out of place.

Dr. Zaki says that we have to grow our empathy muscles through practice and repetition. Nobody is going to get it right all the time. But by the grace of God and through prayer and practice... we can continue to grow and to learn what we need, so that we can go and be the kind of friends, the kind of neighbors, the kind of Christians that this world so desperately needs.

Not people who have all the answers.  
Not people who can point out the sin that led to the suffering.

But people who can show up and shush, people who can listen and begin to understand. People who can share the pain not trying to fix it, but trying to spread the burden out so that nobody has to carry it all alone.