

Parting the Waters

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Isaiah 43:1-7

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Several years ago, Kate Bowler, who teaches at Duke University Divinity School, wrote a book entitled 'Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved.' Bowler was a student of the Prosperity Gospel which in her words was a quasi-Christian belief that 'God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith,' and that 'God will give you your heart's desires: money in the bank, a healthy body, a thriving family, and boundless happiness.'¹ Bowler reminds us that 'one of the prosperity gospel's greatest triumphs is its popularization of the term 'blessed.' 'Over the past 10 years 'being blessed' [#blessed] has become a full-fledged American phenomenon. Drivers can choose between the standard, mass-produced 'Jesus is Lord' novelty license plate or 'Blessed' for \$16.99 in tasteful aluminum. When an 'America's Next Top Model' star took off his shirt, audiences saw it tattooed above his bulging pectorals. When Americans boast on Twitter about how well they're doing on Thanksgiving, #blessed is the standard hashtag. It is the humble brag of the stars. #Blessed is the only caption suitable for viral images of alpine vacations and family yachting in barely there bikinis. It says: 'I totally get it. I am down-to earth enough to know this is crazy.' But she reminds us, it also says: 'God gave this to me. [Adorable shrug] Don't blame me, I'm blessed.'²

To proclaim we are blessed Bowler reminds us, can express our gratitude, but it can also imply that we deserve what we have and what we believe we have earned and are happy for the world to know. What Bowler discovered in her study of the prosperity gospel was that even though she knew the prosperity gospel was a reduction of the gospel of Jesus Christ, she realized that she lived by her own version of it as well. She recalls: 'I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes...' she could buy into platitudes that everything happens for a reason and God has a better plan and will bring about happiness until at age 35 she found herself struggling to live with a difficult cancer diagnosis and the likely prognosis that she would die. If everything happens for a reason, her husband replied to the one thousandth well-meaning person who offered this declaration in the form of pastoral care, I would love to know the reason my wife is dying. It is almost if there can only be one prescribed psychic emotion or condition for discipleship or evidence of the presence of God and it takes the form of prosperity, a reason for everything that happens, and an endless abundance of blessings only.

¹Kate Bowler, 'Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me,' in *The New York Times* February 13, 2016, and Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018), xi.

² Kate Bowler, 'Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me,' in *The New York Times* February 13, 2016.

Often we read passages like this one from Isaiah and equate it with some form of the prosperity gospel. Look how 'chosen' we are, how special we are that God would hold us up through water and flame and Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba. We are the exalted; we are the chosen people for success, goodness, and boundless happiness. Look how blessed. But I wonder if the prophet of the exile who first uttered these words and the people of the exile who first heard these words felt all that #blessed. These words were spoken to the children of the children of the exiles who were still languishing in Babylon and after more than a generation of time, not able to return home. These words were spoken to a people not so much counting their blessings or keeping track of their divine sanctioned successes, but people who were wondering in the words of the psalmist 'how to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land,' and perhaps even more deeply if everything happens for a reason, why has the temple of our Lord been destroyed and we have been resigned to captivity in the hinterlands. Where is God? Does God care? Does God make a difference in the midst of the socio-political topsy turvy of the ancient Near East or are we resigned to take up the religion of our overlords? I wonder if this is closer to the sentiment and these are the type of questions that were being asked by Isaiah's hearers. And as a result, when the word of the Lord who created you O Jacob and formed you O Israel came to the prophet and he declared 'do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine,' I wonder if the Israelite captives responded not by posting about their blessedness on Twitter, but by rolling their eyes like Sarah when she was told she would bear a son (Genesis 17:18). Yeah right, we are chosen; we are blessed. If this is what it means to be blessed, I hate to see what it means to be cursed.

In the moment, no one believes prophets could possibly be describing reality. There is not much mention of Jesus' birth or life in Roman history and only a brief mention in the Jewish historian's accounts; Bethlehem and Nazareth were backwater places in a backwater part of the Roman Empire and yet everything that was announced in Bethlehem about the birth of a Savior by the angels and the prophesy of the wise men become truth and reality much deeper and wider and substantial and longer lasting than anything the imperial reign of Caesar could fashion or offer, but no one would have believed it at the time. Maybe Mary, probably not Joseph, and certainly not the rest of Nazareth. It may have come in a first century form, but we probably would have heard a lot of, 'Yeah, right.' I don't know maybe we think the same thing when we hear the baptismal promise that is pronounced over us, that we are a child of God. Yeah, right. I am not blessed. I don't always live like it. I am not worthy. I don't really want that title. I would just as soon aim for something else, some lower hanging fruit. Something I can control; something I can achieve for myself. Something a bit more malleable that I can fashion in an image I prefer. Can reality really be baptized into me, over me, and claimed for me without my say so? Yeah, right.

Do not fear, Isaiah begins in his message to us. That is God's answer to all our 'yeah rights.' Do not fear, says the Lord who created you and claimed you, 'I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.' Tom Long reminds us that we could hardly find a better summary of the gospel than the words 'do not fear.' It is spoken to Israel in exile, it is spoken by the angels to the shepherds, and he reminds us, 'do not fear,' are the very first words the angels speak to human beings after God raises Jesus from the dead at Easter. Do not be afraid.³ The entry of God into the world and the Easter redemption of God's world are not just about giving us the divine blessing of a prime parking spot or a technique for making life easy. In a piece in *Journal for Preachers* a year ago, friend and mentor John Rogers reminds us that 'to live by faith may not mean less pain or less distress; the way of faith is not a detour around adversity...sometimes we can do no more than cling to the faith of others'...sometimes the faith of our church, those who sit next to us in the pews, have 'to bear us along in our doubt and disability.'⁴ He recalls hearing from a parishioner that there are times or places when 'I just cannot say the creed.' He replied: 'I'll say it for you until you can say it again.' 'Whether or not you were aware of it, there have been times when you have had to say it for me; and I shall probably need you to do so again in the future,' too.⁵

The truth, the reality, the state of the union that Isaiah declares is that we are children of God who has claimed us in the waters of baptism, whose love will not let us go, and who has chosen us to live lives that embody the characteristics of this kind of love, whether it comes in the form of welcoming the prodigals home, standing against injustice, or entering into the misery of fellow human beings and seeking their welfare. We may not always believe we are these things, we may not always feel like doing these things, we may not always wish we had been baptized into this reality and these expectations. But Isaiah never promises us that...only that no matter what we might be experiencing, no matter what the state of our faith or our belief at the moment, no matter how we might feel about all the responsibilities that come attached to our baptism, we have been redeemed, we have been called by name, we already belong to the Lord who created us and formed us. We have been claimed as God's, not just for celebration or blessing, but so that our lives may be used to reflect the character of the One who has claimed us. Jesus' baptism is not the end of the story, nor is ours. Will we become in the time that has been given to us, what we already are in eternity? Will we become in real time the fully claimed, redeemed, and formed creatures that we already are in the hands of God? We may say 'yeah right,' but Isaiah says we will.

Time and time again scripture, Jesus, even our own baptism turns what we think is reality, what we think is everything, completely on its head. Descartes was wrong about reality. I think therefore I am is not quite right. I am not the center of the universe, as

³ Tom Long, Preface, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, viii.

⁴ John B. Rogers, Jr., *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2020), 6.

⁵ John B. Rogers, Jr., *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2020), 6.

seductive as it often feels. I love therefore I am is even too self-centered. I think what Isaiah would have us believe is a dimension beyond that. I am loved therefore I am. My existence, my reality, who I am is not conjured up from within, nor is it something I am in charge of maintaining or producing from within, but comes through the One who created, formed, and redeemed us. I exist, because I am loved. We are loved, therefore we exist. Or to use the words of 1 John, we love, because God first loved us. Whether we are clinging to the faith of others or stumbling through our own acts of devotion or simply letting the faith sustain us and nothing more, the deeper truth, the undergirding reality, and the overarching truth that surrounds, sustains, and supports the pinnacles and depths of our individual lives is that we exist first and foremost, because we are loved. We have been loved into existence by the God of Jacob and the God of Israel, so much so that God becomes one of us, is baptized with us, and has intertwined his life with ours in such a way that we can never be entangled from him. This is who we are.... We are baptized, because we are loved. We are children of God, because, we are loved. We exist, truly exist, not because we can think or feel or produce anything on our own, no we exist, because we have been loved into existence. We are, because we are loved. Thanks be to God.