

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
8th Sunday After Pentecost  
Mark 6:14-29  
July 15, 2018  
Sermon, Regina Hurley

I read a story, recently, about a young woman, Kate, intensely struggling with horrid events happening in her life. The book she wrote about her struggle is titled: Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved. Isn't that a great title? *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. Kate's a 35-year-old associate professor at Duke Divinity school, a mother of a 2-year-old boy she treasures named Zach and a husband, Toban, her childhood sweetheart. She was brought up in the Mennonite Church and has a deep faith. After years of hard work, her life is what she dreamed it would be. Then the bottom falls out. She is diagnosed with stage-IV colon cancer. She is given 3 months to live. Her world is turned upside down and inside out.

In the months ahead, as she seeks out possible treatments, Kate becomes overwhelmed. What happened? She had been doing all the right things. Why was God doing this to her and her family. Where was God anyway?

Over time, Kate realizes she had been living as though she was in control of the shape of her life. If she worked hard, with enough determination, and the all-American can-do spirit, she could conquer anything. It was the type of positive thinking that the prosperity gospel teaches—if you succumb to illness or misfortune in life, you're a failure and your relationship with God is clearly defective.

Kate is afraid, terribly afraid, of losing Zach and Toban. She refuses to give up. I can make this happen, she tells herself. I can get better if I only try hard enough. Kate had done her dissertation on the mega-church preachers—she knew their positive thinking message well and realizes she'd been taking on some of message.

Yet she is sick and no amount of positive thinking shrinks her tumors. She begins to “wonder what it means to die in a society that insists everything happens for a reason.” Kate questions this—there are no reasons for her cancer, as far as she's concerned.

Kate begins to look deeper inside herself, for the God that resides within each of us. She writes:

“St. Theresa of Avila once said ‘We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can—namely, surrender our will and fulfill God's will in us.’ . . . For Christians, surrender is a virtue, the writings of the saints are full of commands ‘to let go’ and to submit yourself to the will of God. All of American culture and pop psychology scream against that. Never give up on

your dreams! Just keep knocking, that door is about to open! Think positively! Self-improvement guaranteed!” (from Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved, Kate Bowler, Random House, 2018, p 86).

“We’re addicted to self-rule!” Kate says (Bowler p 87). “Control is a drug and we’re all hooked. . .”(Bowler, p 84). How we love to think we’ve got it down. We’re in control of our lives, we tell ourselves. We’ve got the power. If I do certain things, good results are sure to follow. We cling to the need for certainty in our lives as if somehow that makes life safer.

In today’s gospel, it is clear that King Herod certainly liked to think that he was in control. On the surface, the story of Herod’s involvement with John the Baptist’s beheading is fairly straightforward. King Herod is supposedly married to his brother’s wife, Herodias. John, a renowned prophet deeply in love with God, tells the King that this marriage is wrong. Herodias is over the top angry at John; she demands the King throw John in prison. He reluctantly does, to appease Herodias. Then, one night, Herod throws a big birthday bash for himself with his influential friends as guests. His step-daughter, Salome (confusedly called Herodias in Mark’s version of the story), performs an enticing dance. The King is so aroused by her that he tells her he’ll give her anything she asks for, even half his kingdom.

Salome, not knowing what she wants, goes to her mother. Her mother sees the perfect opportunity to get rid of John once and for all. She tells her daughter to ask for John’s head on a platter. Salome does so. Her step-father doesn’t like Salome’s request but has to comply with her wish in order to save face before his guests.

John’s head is cut off and brought back on a platter. Salome gives it to her mother. When John’s disciples hear about it, they come and take John’s body and lay it in a tomb.

End of story.

Ah, but is it? It was Sir Walter Scott who said “what a complex web we weave when first we practice to deceive.” So many layers of deception to convince ourselves and others that we’re in control. So many human emotions that drive our decisions and actions. For many, fear drives us--fear of not getting what we want or fear of losing what we have. For the King, it’s fear that his tenuous political power and his personal reputation will be diminished if he refuses Salome’s request. He is desperate to show his peers that he is strong. His pride will not let him renege on his promise to Salome.

His wife, Herodias, is filled with lust for power and fear that John the Baptist will convince her husband to throw her out of the palace. Salome, with a drunken step-father and a vengeful, manipulative mother is caught in the middle. She's terrified that another fight will erupt between Herod and her mother. She needs to make sure that doesn't happen. In today's lingo, we'd call these three the perfect dysfunctional family!

What about us? What are you afraid of losing? Or afraid of not getting? For me, it's needing others to think I've got it all together—I want you to believe I'm sailing on the calm seas of my life because I'm in control. Is it working?

Interestingly, it is Herod who has a relationship of sorts with John the Baptist. He knows of John's reputation as a holy man, an ascetic. John lives in the desert, wears clothes made out of camel hair tied at the waist with a leather belt. He survives on locusts and wild honey. He draws thousands with his message of repentance. Repent! Change the direction of your life, John tells those he baptizes. "Turn your old life in for a kingdom life," John says (Mk 1:7-8, Eugene Patterson, *The Message*). I am just the one preparing the way for the Messiah. The Messiah will change you from the inside out. But you have to be ready and willing to be changed. You have to give up your ideas of power and control over your life and let God be God.

This is hard stuff; I'm not saying that letting go of our self-will or ideas of power and control is easy. Everything in us fights against it. Yet the deeper we go inside ourselves, into that place of our soul, that still quiet place where God resides—the more foolish our notions of power and control appear. It takes time, patience, persistence, and courage to look inside ourselves. It can get darned scary. How much easier and safer it is to stay on the surface of our lives, doing what others expect of us and what we expect of ourselves. Giving the appearance that all is fine. We've got it made. Ah, how seductive is the illusion of power and control! Sometimes, we can skate through life in that illusion.

Then, tragedy hits. We find out our child is a drug addict. We desperately try to stop the addiction. Nothing works. Or, our best friend suddenly dies of a heart-attack leaving behind his wife and three young children. Or the marriage we were sure would last forever falls apart. Or our husband or wife is killed while serving their country overseas. Are we really in control of our lives? Do we really have the power we think we have?

Perhaps it is just a lie we love to tell ourselves. Kate, the 35-year-old Duke Divinity School professor with cancer, had to come to grips with that lie. She learned that true power comes from surrender. In 2 Cor 12, St. Paul writes, "When I am weak, then I am strong." Strong in the

inexhaustible power of God. Depending on the immensity of that power makes us strong. Relying on the God within each of us makes us strong. That is what true power is. God, not me. God, not you.

I'm not suggesting that we lay down and sit in front of the TV for the rest of our lives. As much as I would like that some days! No, God wants us to act, to participate in our lives, to love others and allow ourselves to be loved. God wants us to use the gifts he has given us. He wants us to fulfill our potential. At the same time, God wants us to share our blessings with those in need. And let us not forget that God wants us to be gentle with ourselves. "Blessed are the meek," Jesus tells us, "for they will inherit the kingdom of God." (Mt 5:5).

With God's help, and through hard work, Kate was able to get into an experimental cancer drug clinical trial at Emory University. Her cancer tumors eventually shrunk. Slowly but surely, and with a great deal of physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle, Kate picked up the pieces of her life. She no longer believes in the certainty of life, in the need for her to be in control, or that there is a reason for everything that happens.

Kate's tumors may come back some day. In the meantime, she is living life to the full. Most days, she is secure in God's love for her. And she knows in a much deeper way that bad things happen to good people. People die horrible deaths. John the Baptist was beheaded. His cousin, Jesus, would be crucified on the cross. Yet through it all, the love of God anchors us. That love, which is so powerful and so pervasive, endures.

Here are some questions to ask yourself. Do you have a Herod-complex that makes you think you have to be in control of everything? Are you trying to impress others with your power? Or, to change the direction of your life? Are you open to accepting God's love and living your life to the fullest?

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Resources: Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*, Random House, 2018