

Grounded in Stories
Job 1-7, 34-41
The Inclusive Version reading

Kate is wearing her hospital gown and an IV and pulling books off the shelf. Not one book, but dozens of books. There in the hospital gift shop she asks to speak to the manager. And the manager comes out in her embroidered sweater, cautious and careful, asking how Kate needs help.

“I need you to know that these books are not suitable to be sold in a hospital.”

Kate points to the pile of Christian bestsellers on the floor.

She gestures to *Best Life Now*. “Like this one, he’s saying that God will reward you with money and health if you have the right kind of faith. He’s America’s most famous prosperity preacher. Normally I can handle this. But you can’t sell this in a hospital. You can’t sell this to me. You can’t sell books that blame people for their own illness.”

Kate Bowler is 36 at the time, diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, with a son who is only two.

She writes about this moment in the gift shop in her latest book, *No Cure for Being Human*.

Kate wanted to speak with the manager in the bookstore... And I wanted to speak with the manager as I read Job....

Today’s reading comes 38 chapters into the book, and let’s recap the drama in Job to this point....

Job, who is a good, honorable, and thriving man, has livestock and children and prosperity. And then this adversary figure—Satan—goes up to God and says, “You know, God, he’s only praising you because he has so much. Take it away and he won’t praise you.” And God responds by taking the bait (revise) and so in one single day, Job’s livestock, servants, and children all die. But that’s not enough! Job is still praising God so then Satan says, let’s test him again, and God agrees. This time Job gets painful sores. Then some unhelpful friends come and tell him how the world works, which is not his experience. All this leads up to Chapter 38 and today’s words, which are part of a conversation between Job and God when Job is trying to understand why he has to suffer.

And here are some of the problems that I had with the passage we heard today....

-This is set up like a courtroom scene, with, as my Bible footnotes, “God the prosecutor cross-examining the witness.”

-Job is asking a question about why good people suffer, and God’s “answer” in this passage is to talk about the creation of the world. But Job isn’t actually questioning God’s power here....

-Mrs. Job is given only a couple of lines, is denied her own name, and isn’t even mentioned in Job’s obituary at the end.

-And finally, the third verse, “Hitch up your belt like the fighter you are!,” which I did not have Wayne read in the NRSV translation, which is where Go says, “Gird up your loins like a man.” As someone asked in Bible study this week, “Is this an example of toxic masculinity?”

Today we consider what it is to be grounded in stories....

We think about the stories that make us or destroy us, the stories that give us meaning and purpose or tear us apart.

What is our deep story?

Is our deep story the way that someone described us when we were six, and we've made that our deep story?

For the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, his deep story is that he needs a brain.... Until he realizes that he had it already.

For the lion, it is that he lacks courage—until Dorothy shows him he has it.

For Ted Lasso, it's that vulnerability can be strength and that a team can do more together than they could ever do apart.

And Job's deep story, prior to tragedy, is that good comes to those who are good, who do good, and that suffering comes to those who choose evil.

But that deep story of Job is challenged as he suffers.

This of course isn't a question that's unique to Job.

It's a question for all of us, trying to make meaning from suffering, trying to understand what feels incomprehensible.

When Carol George began seminary, at her orientation she was told, "We are not here to answer your questions. We are here to improve the quality of the questions you ask."

Today I want to propose some questions we can ask the stories we are told.... The stories that shape and define us.

Take a story that you've been taught and ask, "Can we read this another way?"

Chimamanda Adichie gave a TED talk entitled "the danger of a single story." In it, she quotes "The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story."

Where do we start in the story?

Adichie describes her own beginning in story. "I was also an early writer. And when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. All my characters were white and blue-eyed. They played in the snow. They ate apples. (Laughter) And they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. (Laughter) Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow. We ate mangoes. And we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English

so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. (Laughter) She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning, pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her, in any way. No possibility of feelings more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals."

The danger of a single story.

Job and his friends had read the story only one way.

Be righteous and good and you will be rewarded on earth; be evil and you will be punished. But what if we had started the story with the servants, or with Job's camels or with a mother living in the same town trying to feed her hungry baby?

Have we been reading deep stories in our life only one way?

Do we start with only one part and not another?

Where else can we begin in them?

We can ask, "Who was written out of this story?"

The author Brian Doyel wondered about Mrs. Job. In the whole book of Job, verse after verse, she's given only a spare few lines and one passing mention. Doyel imagines her as

"the astounding Mrs. Job

With no mention of her humor, or the vast hills of diapers,
Or her wit which survived kids throwing up and the sheep
Wandering off, and plagues of locusts and things like that.
A good editor, I feel, would have asked for just a glancing
Nod to the wry hero of the tale, at least acknowledgment;
Something like a new last line after *So Job died, being old
and full of days*, which might read, *And also passed a most
Amazing woman, of whom nothing other than the blessing
Was ever said, her heart being a gift beyond calculation by
Man, her mind sharp, her tongue gentle, her hands a mercy,
And her very presence full reason to kneel in prayer at that
Which the Lord in His mercy has made and granted briefly.
A line like that would only hint at her, but it's a start, right?"*

Who is left out of the story?

Whose voice is silent, who is only a shadow?

How do we go back over the stories we have been told and listen again?

Maybe in our own lives we were told our mother's version of a story of who we are, but not our grandmother's. Maybe our grandmother's version lets us see ourselves with more compassion and understanding. Or maybe one version helps us to understand our neighbors more deeply.

Three, how can we open up enough space in a story for us to enter and respond?

Patrick Willson images God's speech to Job this way, "Pointing out the assortment of wild creatures, God summons human conversation partners with a capacity to enjoy all that makes up the created order.

We did not imagine that Job, with all its laments and challenges, would end with such questions. But they are not merely rhetorical; they are creative. They challenge our imagination to embrace the whole of the creation, from the foundations of the earth to the farthest stars in the heavens. With these questions God is building a temple spacious enough to include all that has been created. These questions trace the arches and erect the buttresses of a cathedral."

The questions are creative!

Imagine if we think about them as creative, asking for us to enter in, to participate in this world! Imagine if we hear the words in Job as present and future tense, not just past tense....

Something like God saying to US, "Are you here, in this day when turtles find themselves warmed on rocks and new puppies chase each other around the room and old dogs sleep in spots of sun?"

"Are you here, in this day when the foundations of the earth need your art and your words and your compassion and your attention?"

Not were you there asked as accusation with the conclusions already known, but are you here, asked as an invitation that invites your reply.

At the end of her Kate Bowler's new book, she includes an appendix for reframing some of what we've been taught....

She opens some phrases up to make them more than a single story, invites us in.

She takes the line, "Everything happens for a reason," which she doesn't believe, and makes it "We must learn to face uncertainty with courage."

Kate writes, "Our lives are not problems to be solved. We can have meaning and beauty and love, but [not] resolution."

So today, take a story that you've been told and read it again.

Read it for the voices left out.

Read it from the bottom-up.

Read it as though you can enter in to the story, and create something, because you can.

Revise the parts that diminish you or make you fold up in defeat.

Because the great invitation in this life is not to explain everything but to, as Kate says, seek the meaning and beauty and love while the questions remain.

Because the world was not just created once but is created every day, by the stories that we believe and the stories that we make real.

Because God is still speaking, and creating, and looking at stars, beside you.

Amen