

Just Breathe

Isaiah 40:21-31 and Mark 1:29-39

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“A quivering mass of availability.”

These words were used by my former professor of Christian Ethics, Stanley Hauerwas, to describe the state of pastoral ministry. While many congregations long for their pastor to always say “yes” to another appointment, another call, another visit, another meeting, Dr. Hauerwas has concluded that such availability does not benefit anyone.

While pastoral ministry is the vocation I know best, I am aware that these words, “quivering mass of availability,” could be used to define people in a wide range of vocations.

How many of you have your work email accounts available with just one click on your iPhone?

How many of you pride yourself on responding to work emails in the evenings and on weekends—not wanting to keep anyone waiting?

How many of you could also be experienced or described as a “quivering mass of availability?”

Can any of you remember a time when you responded to the question, “How are you?” with words like, “well rested,” “incredibly balanced,” or “delighting in life’s ease”?

This past Tuesday evening, I went to Sixth and I Synagogue to hear Duke professor and *New York Time’s* bestselling author, Kate Bowler, be interviewed by Judy Woodruff about her new book, *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* At an event following, I was given a goody bag that included a carefully curated set of stickers—one of which I am struggling to imagine sticking anywhere as it reads, “Normalize Mediocrity.”

Normalize mediocrity.

Such a message goes against all I have been taught and seek to embody. I read it and hear a former dean’s voice ringing in my ear as he used to regularly say that “the problem with the church is that there is too much mediocrity masquerading as God’s faithfulness.”

Which stance, then, am I to take?

Which way of life am I to embody?

Which posture is most faithful—being “a quivering mass of availability” or seeking to “normalize mediocrity?”

I’m not sure Jesus would choose either of these answers when responding to the question. But I am confident Jesus would never prescribe any person always make themselves available. The gospels reveal how Jesus disciplined himself to step away, rest, and pray before reengaging in the needs of those around him. Jesus was, in fact, rather proficient in embodying two of *The Guardian’s* “Tiny Changes to Transform Your Life”—number 21 which reads, “Remembering to breathe” and number 41, “Taking micro moments of rest throughout the day.”

If you’ve been worshipping with us for several weeks, then you might be surprised to see that we are *still* in the first chapter of Mark. The earliest gospel begins with John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord before baptizing Jesus in the Jordan. Jesus’ robe is barely dry

when the Spirit immediately drives him into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan, a text we turn to on the first Sunday of Lent. Jesus then returns to Galilee, calls his first disciples, and casts an unclean spirit from a man who appears while he is teaching in the synagogue.

Jesus and his disciples depart the synagogue with fame spreading like wildfire and enter the house of Simon and Andrew where he takes the hand of Simon's bed-ridden, fever-inflicted mother-in-law and lifts her up. Word of this second healing, on top of his capacity to teach as one with authority, provokes the whole city to gather outside the door as Jesus continues to cure the sick and casts out additional demons.

Jesus' ministry has just begun, and he's already an instant hit.

People are literally lining up to see him.

Imagine being in his shoes. Ponder with me how easy it would be to bask in the attention before figuring out how to keep the fame spreading.

But rather than hiring a publicist, starting a podcast, or capturing an image of the crowd to Instagram, Jesus steps away.

He gets up "in the morning, while it is still dark," with the original Greek involving the word *proi* which "indicates the period from 3:00 to 6:00AM" and goes to a deserted place to pray.¹

Jesus removes himself from the need pressing in on him, the success surrounding him, the accolades poured upon him—and goes to the desert—the same place where he was tempted before angels came to wait on him—and prays.

This instance is one of three in which Jesus is found praying in Mark's gospel. In Mark 6, after feeding 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, Jesus immediately makes his disciples get into a boat while he dismisses the crowds before going up a mountain to pray. Jesus is found praying again in chapter 14, when he is deeply grieved on the night before his crucifixion, and cries out, "Abba, Father...remove this cup from me; Yet, not what I want but what you want."

When the demands are significant, Jesus goes away to pray.

When needs have been met, Jesus goes away to pray.

When he is deeply grieved and filled with anguish, Jesus throws himself down and prays.

What about us?

When do we remain engaged, and when do we retreat?

When do we stay present to the people and need around us, and when we step away to allow God to pour life back into us?

When do we continue to count on our own capacity and giftedness—and when do we drawl upon the strength of God as the one in whom we live, move, and have our being?

In early 1956, when death threats were common and a firebomb tempted to destroy their family home, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reportedly went to the kitchen, sat down at the table, bowed his head, and vulnerably prayed, "'I'm down here trying to do what's right. But I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. I'm afraid. I can't let people see me like this because if they see me weak, they'll get weak. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left.'" After naming his deepest truth, he heard God say to him, "'Martin Luther, stand up for

¹ Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Bible Commentary, Mark* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 101.

righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. I will be with you. I heard the voice of Jesus saying to fight on. He promised never to leave me. No never alone. No never alone.”²

When I read this story late last week, I pondered two things. First, I have never regretted being completely honest with God. Quite the contrary, when I tell God how weary I am, how I am not sure I can keep going, let alone show up with a word to offer you, God always shows up.

And second, I have never regretted stepping back, retreating, or savoring the sound of silence as I seek to fully rest in God—decisions that are far too often reactive instead of proactive in my life.

Isaiah 40, from which we heard verses read a few moments ago, forms the beginning of what is known as second Isaiah. These oracles are believed to have been written around 540 BCE, about 45 years after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. The Israelites have been deported to Babylon, a situation that no doubt led to both a static state of weariness and a questioning of God’s promises. Isaiah comes on the scene and reminds the Israelites of God’s faithfulness through a series of rhetorical questions. The prophet then redeclares God’s character and faithfulness, describing how no alternative source of life exists beyond God. No other rival comes close to being able to hang stars in the sky. Isaiah then reminds the people that God’s creative work is not finished but rather continues through what Walter Brueggemann describes as “Yahweh’s endless, energetic attentiveness to creation. Yahweh is not worn out, not exhausted. Yahweh the creator God is directly attentive to the faint and powerless, to those who have no energy of their own. The creator God sustains and gives life to creatures who have no intrinsic power for life of their own.”³

Isaiah’s original audience is powerless, weary exiles living far from home.

And yet, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow which means God is still actively showing up with direct attentiveness to those who have no energy of their own—including we who are gathered in this room or listening online today.

Brueggemann goes on to name how, “Yahweh is the single variable—either weakness or Yahweh. There is no third alternative, no chance for strength apart from Yahweh—not from the gods who are nothing not from the princes and rulers who are nothing and certainly not from the exiles themselves.”⁴

I wonder who or what we have assumed has power to restore us when it or they are actually powerless.

What have we purchased because the liturgy of quick fix and self-help has convinced us that it will make our lives better or easier or safer?

What has laid claim on us?

Earlier this week, Kate Bowler defined heresy as the beautiful things that do not transform us.

What beautiful things have you purchased, consumed, or subscribed to only to find yourself still waiting to be made whole?

What heresies have you been tempted to believe?

² James Howell Preaching Blog.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 27.

⁴ Brueggemann, 27.

I'm not ready to normalize mediocrity.

It's not how I've been wired.

But I am longing to punctuate my days with more of God who holds me in my weariness and renews my strength in a way that no one or nothing else can.

Amen.