

“A Candle Against the Wind”

[Isaiah 40:28-31](#)

Oh my, thank you Samuel and Abraham. When I learned you were singing I began smiling, as I am now, because I knew that your music along with Bobbie’s prayer, Jenni’s message to the children, Claudia’s reading, Carol Ann’s cantoring plus Shine’s sublime presence at the key boards, guaranteed that folk would leave having known they’d been to church. So thanks to each of you. You make my task much easier.

Now I want to begin my remarks with a few lines from Kentucky poet, novelist, farmer, philosopher Wendell Berry who just this week celebrated his 85th birthday, admonishing readers like me to *“laugh, be joyful though you have considered all the facts, and practice resurrection.”*

And so these lines from one of Berry’s *Sabbath* poems:

*I know that I have life
Only insofar as I have love.
I have not love
Except it comes from Thee.
Help me, please, to carry
This candle against the wind.*

A little over a year ago, just prior to learning of Bobbie’s cancer diagnosis, I read two remarkable and, as it turned out, timely books. One is titled There is No Good Card for This: What to Do and Say When Life is Scary, Awful and Unfair to People You Love. I commend it to you.

The second is by a woman named Kate Bowler, an assistant professor in the Divinity School at Duke University, who happens to be an expert in the history of health, wealth and happiness in American religion. Though not a practitioner of what she calls the “Prosperity Gospel,” Kate *was* feeling wonderfully blessed when at age thirty-five she had a great job; a beautiful, baggage-free, stable husband she loved; and a hilariously narcissistic two-year-old son named Zach. She also had, as she learned over the phone – Stage IV colon cancer. “You need to come to the hospital right now.”

Realistic about her prognosis, Kate plunged into treatment to which the cancer failed to respond. Then, thanks to the efforts of a powerful network of faculty members and friends, she was accepted into an experimental treatment that involved immunotherapies and more surgeries (“I’m up to my fifth belly button” she recently acknowledged in a Ted talk – “and the 5th is my least favorite.”) She also wrote a memoir titled Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved.

In an interview at the time her book was published, Kate was asked *Why do you keep working?* Her reply: *I think if we keep going while we can, it makes the world a little bigger for us, and it shows people who we really are.*

Asked how she has changed as a parent? Her reply: *I decided that my new parenting philosophy is that I cannot protect my son [or anyone] from the pain of the world, but I can show him that there is truth and*

beauty in the midst of it. And if I can help him be equally open to lovely things happening as to bad things happening, I will have won as a parent.

And when asked *Did Christianity fail you?* Kate replied: *Sometimes it felt like that, in part because the stuff people said using the Christian faith was incredibly trite, thoughtless and sometimes even cruel. Many people wrote to her saying, "This illness is proof that you've done something bad." Or "this is a test of your character." Or "it's part of God's plan because everything happens for a good reason."* To which her husband replied curtly, *"I'd love to hear the good reason my wife is going to die."*

Yet, she says, Christianity also saved the day. For when bad, unspeakable things happen to you or to those you love – when people are gunned down at a Garlic Festival or shopping for school clothes at Walmart or worshipping in a synagogue or church like this one - you really want a brave faith, one that says, in the midst of the crushing brokenness, there is something else there, namely the undeniable, overwhelming love of God.

And that's what Kate felt and feels to this day when now at age 39 she is *glad* to be approaching forty and regularly thanks God for *wrinkles*. She also says that she doesn't feel angry. Rather, inexplicably, she feels love.

When I could have been feeling abandoned by God, I felt love. And I feel unity with people like me. I feel connected with people who have been jolted by events and yet have found that life is wonderful as well as terrible, gorgeous as well as tragic, that in the darkness there is beauty and there is love. And I feel, most of the time, that it will be more than enough.

*Beauty, unity, love!
Like a candle against the wind*

With this is mind think back to the passage in Isaiah, those beautiful lines written during a terrible time in Israel's history, a time called the Babylonian exile or captivity. Historians all agree this was the low point in Israel's history. They had been flying so high - *the creation of a nation, the beautiful city of Jerusalem, recognition as one of the powers of the world* - then the Babylonians attacked and carried off most of the people, and they plunged into the depths of despair. Much like the disciples after the death of Jesus, they crashed, stopped dead in their tracks!

During that dark and desperate time, Isaiah writes to them, trying to rekindle the candle of confidence not only in themselves but in God who is always on the premises. And so the old prophet sings:

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the
everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable.
God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young shall fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Now whatever else they are, those are strong words of encouragement for anyone who has ever been knocked down, trampled upon, abused, oppressed, abandoned, disillusioned, grief-stricken, or forced into

exile as many of you our brothers and sisters from West Africa have been - properties taken, families disappeared, and you cast into the darkness of the diaspora. I've read some of your harrowing stories in Pastor Daniel's doctoral project.

And yet here you are today, bearing witness with your prayers and your presence and your songs to the power of the prophet's promise that if you will wait with humility, open heartedness, and expectation, our God of holy patience, extraordinary imagination, consuming love and resurrection power will find a way to renew your strength, your courage and your vision so that once again you can *mount up with wings like eagles*, or at least *run without growing weary*, or, if nothing, else, *walk without fainting*, carrying your candle of faith, hope and love against the wind.

All of the impassioned and vitriolic debate over immigration, DACA, visas, workplace audits, asylum, the wall, family separation, squalor, disease and death along the border and the many stories that have been told to support one or another side in the argument, prompted me to read, among other things, the moving, heartrending yet joyful story of one boy's triumph over such poverty, prejudice and politics.

Francisco Jimenez, whom some of you may know, is the former director of the ethnic studies program and recently retired Professor of Modern Languages at Santa Clara University. Born in Tlaquepaque, Mexico, Francisco, at the age of four, wiggled like a snake beneath the wire fence guarding the border between Mexico and Arizona and with his family entered America in search of a better life.

For the first nine years they followed the crops, living in labor camps, under circumstances almost as severe as those they left behind in rural Mexico. Moving from camp to camp, the children missed school and had little hope of learning.

And then one day just as Francisco was about to recite from the *Declaration of Independence*, which he had memorized as a class assignment – *We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights* – just as he was about to recite those historic words he was unceremoniously pulled out of his eighth-grade social studies class and along with his brother, Roberto, deported.

Back in Mexico the boys landed roughly but persevered. Eventually they were allowed to return, this time legally, and, with the help of a kind Japanese strawberry farmer, who understood how it feels to be dislocated and forced into harsh and hostile circumstances, were reunited with their family.

Settled in one place long enough to finish high school, Francisco broke through the obstacles in his life. He worked hard to help support the family, studied on the job, slept little, and achieved much.

With a passion for learning, fueled by the desire to become a teacher, Francisco earned a scholarship to Santa Clara University and eventually received his Master and Ph.D. degrees from Columbia.

And over a life-time of teaching and mentoring his students, he has written his simple books with their simple message: *You can succeed, even if you come from a difficult situation. You can work hard, get an education, and contribute to the community. You can break through, reach out, and take hold.*

Asked how he sustained hope through those years on the circuit of poverty and deprivation, Jimenez says, "I attribute a lot of that to my mother. No matter how bad things were, she had hope. She would always

say, *'God will provide. Things are going to get better.'* I come from a family that is strong in terms of faith.

“One of the things I learned from my parents was that God allows us [like Jesus] to go *through* life with all its struggles for a purpose, and even though we might not know exactly what that purpose is, we should work hard to find what it's all about.

"I see now the purpose of my life is really informed by the experience I had as a child and a young adult. I went through that experience so that I would someday do something about it, not just for myself but to document the experiences of many children and young adults who confront numerous obstacles to 'break through.' And how they manage to *break through* depends as much on their courage, hope and God-given talents as it does on the loving, compassionate and generous people who commit themselves to making a difference in the lives of children and young adults."

*People who will help them carry their flickering candle
of hope and purpose against the wind!*

Are you one of those people?

Bruce, my friend of 65 years, is one of those people. A man with a heart for the marginalized, Bruce has dedicated much of his distinguished legal career to defending people, especially gay men, who are frequently targeted by law enforcement agencies. Up and down the state, in Fresno, Long Beach, and even at the State Supreme Court, Bruce has argued his cases and won. After learning that he had gotten all charges dropped in yet another case here in San Jose just a couple of weeks ago, I sent Bruce an email in which I wrote simply: “Bruce, you are a candle against the wind.” And he is! “A candle against the wind.” Are you?

Amy Wolff, a young mother in Newberg, Oregon, was stunned to learn that six teenagers in her local school district committed suicide during the course of a year and another six were known to have tried. Troubled by this trend among teens and young adults across the nation, Amy decided she had to do something because waiting for good things to happen, waiting for others to act, waiting for God, even, is not passive. Waiting is active. So Amy listened to her heart and her daughters and ended up printing 20 sets of signs that read: **“Don’t Give up.” “It’s not too late.” “Your mistakes do not define you.” “You are worthy of Love.” “You are not alone.” “One day at a time.”**

She then placed those signs randomly in yards throughout the community in the vague hope that they would make a difference for someone. And they did. Though designed for those most vulnerable, teens and young adults, Amy soon learned that the message of hope was age and gender neutral. She heard from an older man who was so depressed that he was contemplating ending *his* life. Then one night he went for pizza and took a different route home where he spotted a set of those signs in someone’s yard. Stopping his car, he sat there in the middle of the street weeping and then went home to tell his family of his pain and struggle. And with their support he got the help he needed. “You saved my life,” he said later, a response heard over and over again as inmates, cancer patients, survivors; people with threatened marriages or lousy jobs or abusive spouses or boyfriends literally as well as figuratively tattoo this simple message of hope on the arm of their soul.

In less than a year, those signs re-appeared in every state of the union and in some 20 foreign countries. Ms. Wolff and her accidental movement have also sold over 10,000 wristbands like this one. And thousands of postcards, pins, pencils and decals conveying a life-affirming message - samples of which you can see over your coffee and conversation in the fellowship hall. Oh, and while you're there talking to Charlie Slayman take a wrist band, or a pin, and wear it or give it to someone who needs to know that he or she matters.

Amy Wolff insists that anyone can make a difference. You do not need to know what is going to happen, whose life you might touch, or exactly where it's all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment and embrace them with patience, faith, hope and love, holding them -

Like a candle against the wind.

The word "Synergy," as you know, means "working together." Specifically it means, "*two entities working together to accomplish something that could not be done by one of them alone.*"

Well, I think that's what we're talking about here. God and Amy Wolff, my friend Bruce, Francisco Jimenez and his parents and teachers, Kate Bowler and *people like her and people like us* working together to find and live a life with purpose and meaning, integrity, courage, forgiveness, love and power, so that even if we fall and fail at something, even if we have to squirm like a snake under a fence in order to work in fields outside Salinas or Watsonville, even if we have to flee our native lands, face a devastating illness, lose a loved one, a child, a spouse, a parent, we can double down on the life we have rather than lamenting the one that we no longer have. Realizing that death itself is not the defeat. Not having lived is the defeat.

*And that's a choice we get to make every day you don't have to but you get to.
That's the point I'm making. You get to choose life!
And if you do, you will make the world a little bit bigger
and better and brighter for yourselves and for others.*

A candle against the wind!

*Thanks be to God
Amen!*