

*“Forget the events of the past,
ignore the things of long ago!
Look, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth—can’t you see it?”*
Isaiah 43

I think that might just be the most shocking verse in the entire Bible. That first line, “Forget the events of the past, ignore the things of long ago!” - Gotta say, I’m personally offended by that advice!

My favourite class in high school was history. I spent four years in university studying the events of the past. And then three more years in seminary learning about ancient texts, ancient languages, and church history.

As preachers, this is what we do: look and listen again and again to these voices of long ago, the things that God and the People of God did and said in the past, and try to work out what that ancient wisdom means for us today.

“Ignore the things of long ago”??? That’s kind of my schtick, I’m heavily invested in paying attention to the things of long ago!

And then that next line, “Look, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth,” what is this, a divine surprise party? Not a big fan of surprises.

My spouse makes fun of me for parking at the furthest edge of the parking lot at our kid’s school every day. But that way I don’t have to deal with the chaos of two dozen other minivans in the rows right beside the door. I get to park in the same spot every day, lots of space, low stress, don’t have to think about it. Totally worth walking an extra 30 steps, even at -35C.

Change is hard for me. For most of us, I think. Though my approach to parking lots may be pushing it a bit.

Most of us deal with change by leaning on our foundations, the relationships and ideals that we believe to be solid and true.

That’s pretty much what religion is about, making our way through an uncertain world by holding on to traditions and rituals and meaning that have been handed down to us through the generations. When our world is shaken, we have the assurance that humans have been facing challenges like these for millenia, and God has been faithful and brought them through.



That's the church. I'm pretty sure that ["You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet"](#) isn't going to make it into the new Mennonite hymnal... (Do Canadian content rules apply to hymnals?)

So this verse is threatening. *God is doing something new?* For many of us, that's not what we want from God. We're looking to God to do again the great things that God has done in the past.

That was the original context of this prophecy from Isaiah as well ([Isaiah 43:15-21](#)). This is a scripture of the Exile, when the people of God were scattered among the Persian empire. They had been defeated, dragged off to foreign lands, and they longed to return to their homeland, the Promised Land.



"Bring us back, God, do it again like you did before, just like Moses and Miriam, through the mighty waters and over the dead bodies of our enemies!"

That's what we want! Make God's People Great Again. That's a seductive call, and not just for politicians.

We love to tell "the old, old story," to look for God re-enacting the salvation of the

past in the same familiar patterns, to imagine God showing up for us in the same ways that God showed up for them.

But here the prophet warns: *forget all of that, for God is doing something new.*

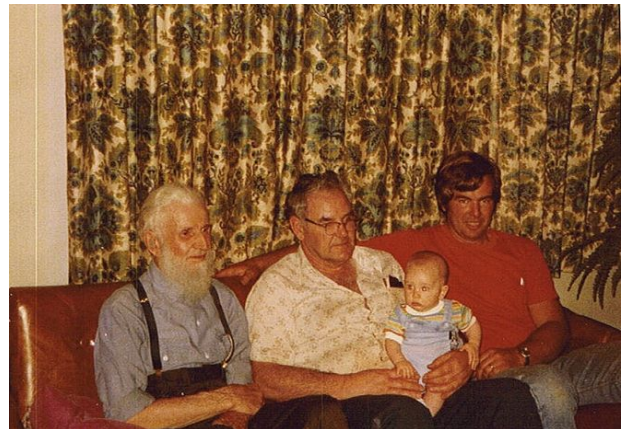
Lori Gottlieb is a therapist and author who writes [a weekly “Dear Therapist” column](#) for *The Atlantic*.

“Often when people come to therapy, I’m listening not just to their story, but to their flexibility with their story. Is this version of the story the only version—the so-called accurate one? Or might the person’s way of telling the story be protective, a way of not having to look at something shameful or anxiety-provoking, of not having to look at oneself clearly? Being flexible with one’s story is where growth begins, where the possibility of a better way to live one’s life is revealed.”

That makes a ton of sense to me. I get locked into one version of a story, and that limits how I move in the world. How often have you heard me refer to myself as an American, usually with at least a little bit of a negative connotation: “what do I know, I’m not from here...” Actually, I’ve lived in Canada since my early twenties, by far the majority of my adult life. I do know a little bit about living in Canada, actually, and if I pretend that I don’t, well that’s a false limit that I’m putting on myself.

While there is comfort and control in repeating the stories and patterns of the past, embracing new ways of seeing and being is the path to growth.

When I was growing up, I had a rather negative relationship with my grandfather; He’s the one in the middle holding me as a baby.



He was the farmer, that was all he did, all he cared about. And I was not, so he had very little interest in me. We saw each other at the barn, and I did my best to stay out of his way, because he was not a very nice man a lot of the time.

When I was in my mid-teens, he and my dad had a falling out over control of the farm, and Grandpa became the great villain in our family’s story. Long story short, my immediate family took our cows and went to the other side of the farm to start over. And we cut off pretty much all connections with my grandparents. Which was fine with me; I was into other stuff and got off the farm as quickly as I could.

When I was in my early 20s, my Grandpa died of heart failure. He had never really reconciled with my parents, though things were less hostile as his health declined.

After he died, my grandma went through all of his stuff. And one day she invited me over to take a look through his books. Which I assumed would be a waste of time, because what would I want with a bunch of books and magazines about tractors and breeding cattle?

To my surprise, my grandpa had this big collection of church history and theology books. Menno Simons stuff, Pennsylvania Mennonite stuff, even a copy of the Quran. My grandma said that he had always been interested in history, and after he retired, he spent a lot of time reading and bought a Quran because he wanted to read for himself what Muslims believed.

Now I had just graduated with a degree in world religions, and I was on my way to seminary. I always assumed that I was totally different from my family, that nobody else was really interested in the stuff that I am. I would never have thought to have a conversation with my Grandpa about the Quran! In my story about him, he was just this one-dimensional farmer character.

What might have been if I had allowed myself to consider a different story? Even finding that out about him, after he died, has allowed me to be just a bit more comfortable with my Peckman roots--my curiosity about religion and history, that didn't spring up out of nowhere. Turns out I belong more than I ever thought.

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I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did, and holding on to that single story about my Grandpa had caused me to miss something really good.

Maybe the things we think we know, the things we think we want, maybe that is keeping us from something better?

I've recently been reading this book by Lisa Gungor, [The Most Beautiful Thing I've Seen](#). Lisa and her husband, Michael, are singer/songwriters with the band Gungor, and by happy accident we're going to be singing one of their songs today, called ["Beautiful Things."](#)

I'd call this book a spiritual memoir, and it's about a lot of things, but one of the main stories that runs through the book is about Lisa giving birth to their second child, a daughter named Lucie.

The pregnancy was complicated and the delivery came sooner than expected. But after all that, Lisa writes,

"Here she was, finally safe. I held her close and with awe as happy tears came.... But she wasn't moving much. She felt limp and motionless, not at all like my first baby felt. I pulled her in, wondering why she didn't make a sound. I watched as her skin turned blue.

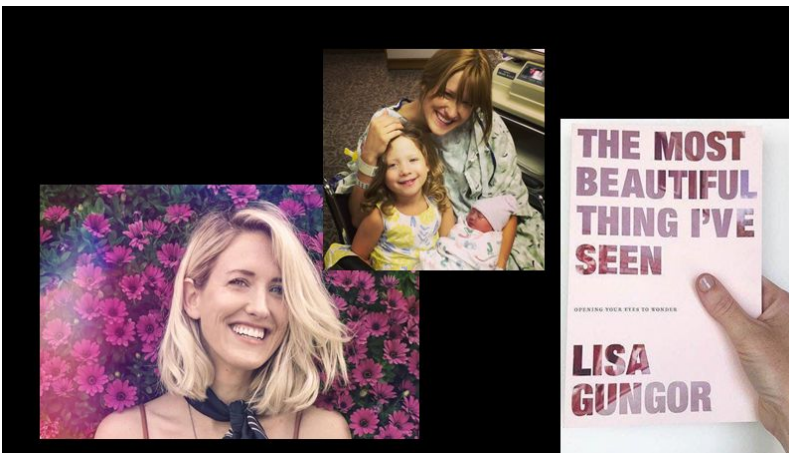
A nurse swiftly took her, saying something about waking her up a bit. Our tiny girl lay like a rag in her hands. No cries, no movement. Nurses huddled and whispered, moved fast and sent secret glances. Michael and I held hands, confused by the rising tension. Then finally a single little cry, and I exhaled, smiled. A nurse walked around to the right side of my bed. She turned, faced me directly, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She wrung her hands a bit, eyes shifting, looking at mine, then darting to the floor. It felt like she needed to tell me something,

so I nodded, encouraged her with a slight smile to go ahead. Her voice shook as she began, “Your baby has signs consistent with Down syndrome. She has a line in her hand, and her eyes...” and that’s all I heard. I saw her mouth moving, but heard nothing.

It is right here. A two-word definition gives me a limited viewpoint for my child. My brain is filling in gaps, drawing on memories, telling me what to feel and just how to see things.

...

The first few moments that our baby experienced her first breaths, first sights, first time being held in my arms, she was purely perfect. Then in minutes she was given a definition. We were given a lens for viewing her with, and my perspective shifted right at her very start. The definition “Down syndrome” is packed full of emotions, full of ideas that are only ideas, and I was diving headfirst into all of the darkest ones that screamed, “She won’t make it, and you won’t either.” (p25-28)



Right from the start, Lucie and her family were handed a script of what life would now be like, the struggles that they would face, how hard things would be. People reacted to the news of their daughter’s birth and condition with “I’m so sorry...” Everyone knew about the limitations, how Lucie would be different, how she would struggle to fit it. Lisa was given a book about Down syndrome, with lists of expected medical complications and health risks:

“I know it was meant to prepare me, but the more I read, the more I didn’t find Lucie in the pages. It was just more information, definitions, facts... “Hey, baby girl, this list? It is not who you are, my love,” I said silently, more my soul speaking it to hers. ‘You are not a list. You are not an outline of concerns or health risks. You are a gift. Perfect. And I know you are going to show us all a thing or two about what it means to live a full life, no matter how many years you get.’”

... I believe Lucie’s life is a gift. I surely don’t want her to suffer, but I don’t think having a body with more or less chromosomes grants us suffering or bliss. I have all the typical chromosomes, and I’ve suffered. I have often felt like a stranger in this world. And what exactly is a good life, anyway? Have I bought into a measurement system that excludes and oppresses? Tells some that their beautiful body is good and others that they are lacking? I knew I’d bought into it.

“I look at Lucie and my idea of a good life is crumbling. And I’m beginning to see that I am the sick and she the healing.” (p140-1)

Lisa Gungor is learning to see the world differently, forgetting what she knows about Down syndrome and instead experiencing life with her daughter.

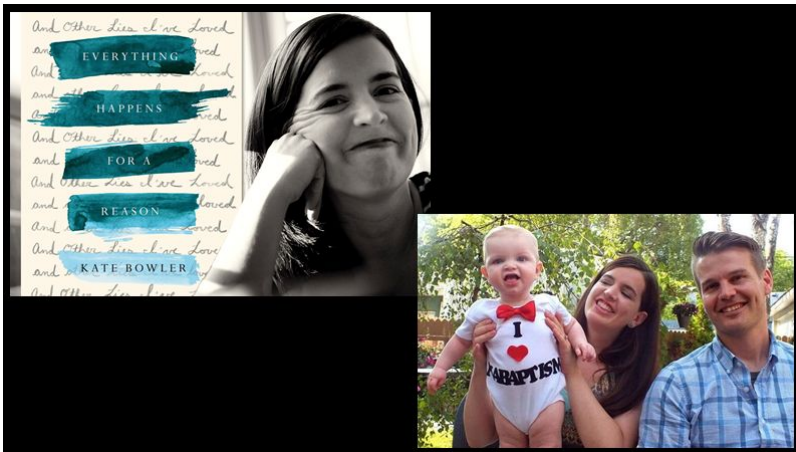
Not that it's easy. Their story includes multiple surgeries, big fears and losses, many adjustments to their expectations. But it's okay. Better than okay.

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I am immensely grateful. The things I thought would crush me became the very things that made me see the world as more magical and vibrant than I ever have. This has all led to truer ground. It was not a blip in the road, a sad detour that could or should have been avoided. It was necessary. It was always the road we needed to be on, always walking toward this light I felt in the center of my being.... This is the sight we learn only by living, only through practice."
(p187-8)

One more example from another book. Kate Bowler, author and professor at Duke Divinity school. Grew up in southern Manitoba, "surrounded by Mennonites," and married a Mennonite boy named Toban Penner. No doubt there are connections here, though her book isn't actually about Mennonites.



The book is called [Everything Happens For a Reason \(and other lies I've loved\)](#).

And it's a story of cancer. After three months of stomach pain she thought was a minor gallbladder issue, Kate was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. There isn't a stage 5.

Kate was 35 when she was diagnosed, a perfectly well-behaved religious scholar, with a nice Mennonite husband and a two year-old son. As you can imagine, one of the biggest questions of the book is why something like this could happen to someone like her.

One of the most endearing and saddest things about being sick is watching people's attempts to make sense of your problem. My academic friends did what researchers do and Googled the hell out of it. When did you start noticing pain? What exactly were the symptoms, again? Is it hereditary? I can out-know my cancer using the Mayo Clinic website. Buried in all their concern is the unspoken question: Do I have any control?

...

The most I can say about why I have cancer, medically speaking, is that bodies are delicate and prone to error. As a Christian, I can say that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here, and so we get sick and die. And as a scholar, I can say that our society is steeped in a culture of facile [simplistic] reasoning. What goes around comes around. Karma is [relentless]. And God is always, for some reason, going around closing doors and opening windows. God is super into that.

That piece was from [an article that Kate wrote](#) for the *New York Times*, which went viral and got her lots of attention, and thousands of unsolicited letters from strangers trying to explain her condition.

Most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos. Even when I was still in the hospital, a neighbor came to the door and told my husband that everything happens for a reason.

“I’d love to hear it,” he replied. “Pardon?” she said, startled. “The reason my wife is dying,” he said in that sweet and sour way he has, effectively ending the conversation as the neighbor stammered something and handed him a casserole.

*Christians want me to reassure them that my cancer is all part of a plan. A few letters even suggest that God’s plan was that I get cancer so I could help people by writing the *New York Times* article. There is a circular logic to these attempts to explain the course of any life. If you inspire people while dying, the plan for your life was that you would become an example to others. If you don’t and you die kicking and screaming, the plan was that you discover some important divine lessons. Either way, learn to accept God’s plan. (p112-3)*

To be clear, Kate is not impressed by that explanation of her cancer. Or any other of the thousands of others she has received since her diagnosis.

“The expectations are clear. Every sixty days I lie in a whirling CT machine, dye coursing through my veins, and the doctors measure whether the four plump tumors in my liver are growing. And if they are not, the doctors smile and agree to move on to the next sixty days of treatment. I live for two months, take a deep breath, and hope to start over again...

That cycle was (is?) stuck on repeat, every sixty days another test that might reveal that time is now up, another treatment to offer another two months of life.

“I’m not dying. I am not terminal. I am keeping vigil in the place of almost-death. I stand in the in-between where everyone must pass, but so few can remain. (p145-6)

[Kate is still alive](#), as of this day, by the way. She’s now 38. I don’t know the latest of her health situation, but she is still writing and [podcasting](#) and tweeting if you want to look her up online.

I don't know the story that Kate's life is telling, what new thing this is for her. And neither does she, and that's kind of the point.

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At the end of her book, she writes about a conversation she had with one of her doctors, who had once told her the secret to living with cancer. "Don't skip to the end," he had said. But then she forgot that secret and only remembered it a year later.

"What do you think I meant by that?" Frank said to me last week, sitting in my office. He can't remember saying it because that day was such a blur. We are marveling at a whole year gone by, a whole year that the doctors said I had a 30 percent chance of surviving.

"I think you meant that we just can't know. And that our brains fill in all the details, for good or for ill. We want to tell ourselves a story--any story--so we can get back to certainty," I reply.

"You know me! I am so desperate to know what's going to happen. At least so I can prepare."

"I sound really deep," he says.

"I just need to make it to fifty. I need to make sure that kid is launched. I need to get most of my life done. I need to lock it down."

"But it comes undone. There are so many times in life when we think we have it locked down," he says. We are quiet again.

Plans are made. Plans come apart. New delights or tragedies pop up in their place. And nothing human or divine will map out this life, this life that has been more painful than I could have imagined. More beautiful than I could have imagined.

"Right. That's the secret--don't skip to the end," I remind myself, sheepishly wiping my face on the sleeve of my sweater. (p160-1).

There is so much that we don't know about this life, even as people of faith. We can struggle against that, holding on to our particular story of where we are, how we got here, and where we want to go.

Or we can loosen our grip, even a little bit, and live.

Lisa Gungor describes suffering as "what happens when we want what is in front of us to be different than it is." She wonders how much suffering actually exists, how much is inevitable, versus how much we create by grasping for control, trying to make life what it isn't.

May God help us forget the things that we don't really know.

May God give us eyes to see new things, in new ways. Amen.