

Disability in the new creation and in the here and now

Amy Kenny

I am certainly not the first person to think of God as disabled.¹ Nancy Eiesland, who pioneered disability theology, imagined God in a sip-and-puff wheelchair. After a friend declared that her disability would be removed in heaven, Eiesland was horrified because she felt that would erase a part of who she was and how she understood God. To nondisabled people, this is particularly difficult to understand because of the hypothesis that disability is always bad or a result of the fall, something to be redeemed *from* in the new creation. To imagine God as disabled seems to diminish God's power or presence. "God can't be disabled," they inform me. "That's insulting to the heart of the Creator of the universe," another retorts. What's insulting to God is when we don't consider disabled people image-bearers. Or when we can only imagine paradise by erasing one-quarter of humanity. Or when we don't feed the least of these when it is well within our power to do so.

I am not interested in adding to the will-we-or-won't-we-be-disabled-in-heaven conversation. On some level, it doesn't matter if our heavenly bodies will be disabled or not. No one can know that. It is out of my control and does nothing to restore the way I am treated now. But at the very least, I would like to be able to go to church without listening to folks impose their unexamined theology on me. Without being bombarded with so many "somedays" and "at leasts" and "you'll be running/kick-boxing/flying/fixed/whole/human in heaven." How we think about eschatology influences how we treat people today. We can't simply put eschatology in another box in our brains. If we believe that disabled people are not whole until they cross an enchanted threshold into the afterlife, that will certainly impact the way we engage with them in the here and now. We talk about God's kingdom as the now and not yet: the in-between space that we get glimpses of but are not fully a part of yet. Treating disabled people as image-bearers only once we get to the not yet impacts the now. Let

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disabled people lead in imagining what new creation could be for us. For some, that's using wheelchairs; for others, it is not. For some, it includes God using ASL. For others, it means seeing. Who's to say it will be the same for all of us? The disability community is a diverse group of various physicalities, mentalities, and beliefs. Learn from us when we tell you how we imagine restoration. Let our imaginations for restoration light the way.

There are those who will counter that I am a beloved child of God, so it doesn't matter what my body looks like or how it functions. This one is well-intentioned, but it fails to understand a key aspect of my identity.

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I am disabled. I don't say that to garner pity or to overemphasize my disability. I fully recognize that it is not the totality of my identity either. But the truth is, being disabled is a core part of the way I interact with the world and with God. Kind acquaintances often want to justify erasing disability by claiming that it just doesn't matter. "God doesn't see you as disabled," they promise. Why should it matter if we celebrate that there are no more disabled people in heaven, when

your core identity is in Christ? Here's why it matters. Imagine if folks cheered for a song that touted "no more brown eyes in heaven." That's a quality that you didn't choose and you can't change. Perhaps some days you don't even *like* your brown eyes. None of us can know if our eye color will endure in a new-creation reality. But a whole crowd chanting, cheering, and celebrating that your eyes won't be brown might feel a bit squidgy. Imagine how you might feel with them belting out, "No more brown-eyed girls, because we'll finally be healed and whole." Guess God isn't a fan of Van Morrison.

Folks who want to erase my disability in the name of embracing how God understands me are still erasing my disability. The idea that our bodies don't matter to God is a lovely idea that comes from a warm place with a cozy blanket, but it is not true. To be sure, I am a beloved child of God, but it *does* matter what happens to my body. Our bodies matter. If they didn't, why would Jesus bother with the incarnation? Seems messy to go through all that spit and sweat and suffering if it was *merely* about souls. Jesus could have snapped a finger, Thanos-style, and waved goodbye to

the dominions of darkness. It certainly would have been so much cleaner (and less painful) that way.

But Jesus chose to take on a body and enter what it means to be human, even all the snotty bits we blush about. The Word became flesh, and we try to turn it back into words again. Our theology is incarnation-



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al because bodies matter. To say that it doesn't matter if I am disabled is to dismiss the incarnation. Maybe if we started acknowledging that, we wouldn't treat prayer like a genie granting wishes. Maybe then we could acknowledge someone else's pain without quickly changing the

subject. Maybe then we could stop blaming disabled bodies on the fall. Maybe then we would understand that all of us—disabled and nondisabled people—are made in the image of God.

It isn't about whether disabilities exist in new creation. They exist now. If you can't imagine a restored world without getting rid of 25 percent of the people in this country and 15 percent of people globally, there is something askew with the imagination. It is simply too small for our big God. Whether we have brown eyes or wheelchairs in new creation, we shouldn't celebrate the erasure of those traits here and now. Most people don't even realize they are doing this. They have conflated disability with suffering and assume it's best to erase both. The issue is, not all disabled people suffer from their disabilities. Not all disabled people want those disabilities changed. But *all* of us suffer from ableist assumptions about people's bodies. All of us suffer from limited imaginations that confine God's creation to replicating Barbie doll versions of humanity.

What if wheelchairs became like glasses? Glasses are correctives, to be sure. We know they act as ocular prosthetics to assist folks to see more crisply. Yet I have never learned of anyone with glasses targeted for curative prayers or shaming calls to repentance. Glasses are a fashion statement, so specifically tailored to someone's aesthetic that some don specs just to look geek chic. Cat eye, aviator, shield, rimless, tortoiseshell; the shapes and styles are boundless. What if we did the same for mobility devices? Instead of stigmatizing wheelchairs, scooters, and canes, what if we celebrated them as fashion statements for disabled folks?

Mobility devices should be functional and effective, but that has never prevented us from designing beautiful, quirky glasses. My cane is royal blue, but what if it were molded to look like Wonder Woman's magical

sword? Seriously, can someone make this for me? What if my scooter had fiery images inside the wheels to create a flip-book effect when I'm zipping down the pavement?

My wheels liberate me and allow me to operate in tandem with my scooter, Diana. Her tires grip the pavement, absorbing the shock waves that my legs would otherwise have to endure. I lean into her slightly as we curve around a corner, like water gently caressing the riverbank as it flows. I feel the texture of the earth, the rhythm of the cement. I hear the symphony of vibrations as we drift from concrete to cobblestone. My physicality does not stop at the tip of my toes or the crown of my head; it extends to the frame of my cobalt chair, able to transport me to new worlds. Just as in Ezekiel's vision, I am fused with these wheels that are my ticket to freedom. I am body, wheels, and fire.

If only people could imagine my wheels in the way they do glasses. My nieces and nephew certainly do. To their vibrant minds, my scooter makes me cool. They don't interpret anything about my mobility devices as tragic, which shows the impact of the kill-or-cure narratives we construct around disability. They think it's exciting that I get to zip around. Perhaps if we recovered this childlike faith of witnessing the beauty in all bodies, we could sing about new creation in a way that included all of us. I do not know if I will be disabled in new creation, but I know there won't be pain, and it's painful for people to celebrate erasing part of me. Maybe what needs healing isn't my body, but society. Maybe people will come to appreciate that disability is not a sad form but a cultural identity with its own wealth of lessons, just like my nephew and nieces do.

Maybe what will be healed is ableism.

About the author

Amy Kenny is a disabled scholar whose writing on disability has been featured in *Teen Vogue*, *Sojourners*, *Shondaland*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Huff Post*. Her award-winning book *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* (Brazos, 2022) mixes humor, personal narrative, and theology to invite faith communities to rethink their unintentional ableism and learn from the embodied wisdom of disabled people.