

What About Us?

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Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14. Psalm 30, Mark 1:40-45

Okay, I may not be the sharpest trend-spotter, but even I have noticed that the lectionary is now on the third week in a row of healing stories from Mark, and next week has another one. Enough already! We know Jesus healed people, LOTS of people – but we don't have to hear each story. I don't know about you, but I find that the healing stories tend to make me feel left out.

The problem is – who do you know who has been healed?? How often does this happen?? And to my mind, this is a problem. We have frequent stories of Jesus healing people, and a few of the disciples healing people. And yet, honestly, this is not something that falls within the mainstream of our experience. So what are we to make of it??

I think sometimes these stories make us feel inadequate – are we not worth healing? Or are we not approaching Jesus right?? It's like when Jesus says, "If you had faith as little as a mustard seed, you could command this mountain to move...." And I think, well I must have almost no faith at all then, because I'm not having that kind of response to my prayers. Or what about when Jesus says, "Ask and you shall receive...." As the Rev. Jana Childers once said in a sermon I heard: if it were that easy, all the 10-year-old girls would be braiding ribbons into the manes of their very own ponies right now. Obviously, there's more to it than this.

I think a lot of us can relate to Naaman too – remember, he is the Syrian general who goes to Elisha to be healed. And when Elisha sends word by a servant that he should go wash in the river, we can understand why Naaman might be disappointed. He didn't even see the prophet. He would have expected a better show than that – he should have come out, waved his arms around, said something really profound, and then Naaman would have felt that he had really seen a man of God. What was this – send the servant with a message about where he should bathe?? That's it??

But Naaman at least gets his miracle eventually. Which is a lot more than many of us seems to get. So what about us? What do we make of this??

I want us to realize that our experience with this is actually more in line with most of the Biblical folks than we may have realized. King David had sons who died. Paul had some physical ailment that he repeatedly asked God to heal, without success. Jesus asked that the cross be taken from him. Even during the ministry of Jesus, many people were sent away without being healed. He healed many, but not everyone was healed. Israel ended up in exile for a long time.... These were all God's people, some of them remarkably faithful people, and yet they experienced times when the deepest desires of their hearts went unfulfilled. So while we can be amazed at these miracles of healing: Naaman, and all the people Jesus healed – still if we're taking our faith seriously, we have to be a little bothered by it all. How do we make peace with

this? Even when folks are faithful, it is apparently not any guarantee that circumstances will go well.

And we want guarantees – we want safety. We want to know that this all-powerful God will not allow our loved ones to suffer or die, that the God who loves us will not let our finances fail, we want to know that the Creator of the Universe can and will protect us. But that's not the way it works.

During the five-plus years I have been here, the world has experienced September 11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the worsening of the Aids pandemic, and 30,000 people dying every day of starvation. Are the people who have been dying in these events not loved by God?? Doesn't God care about them and their families?

And in our own congregation, we have lost members to moving and to leaving, and we have lost some really beloved faithful Christians to death: we've lost people like John Hudec, Betty Sparks and Ashley Thompson. Member Robin Mazur lost two brothers. Other members have had serious health problems, or financial problems. Some of you have had family crises. And none of it was sent by God. Good, faithful people are having significant problems and God isn't fixing them. So how do we deal with this when we read these passages about healing??

I think we come to a point where we say we don't have the answers. We don't stop seeking the answers, but we come to a point of saying we may not get the answers. Yesterday, I was examined by Winnebago Presbytery – they read my statement of faith and they asked me a number of questions about it, questions they felt I hadn't adequately answered or questions asking me to reflect theologically on some of my experiences in life. And I didn't have good answers to everything. At one point I had to say: earlier in my life, I worked as a maintenance electrician and a CPA. And in those jobs, I solved problems. I was good at that and I loved solving problems. Eventually I came to understand that many of the really interesting problems are theological, and they don't all have answers. My mom says that church isn't the place with the answers, but it is the place to ask the questions. My mom, in case you haven't noticed over the past 5 years as I've quoted her from time to time, is a very wise woman.

We don't have answers to all the questions. We especially don't have answers to the really tough questions. And we're not alone in that either. Some of you may remember the book of Job – where Job is a righteous man, a good man, a faithful man. And God allows all sorts of bad things to happen to Job – he suffers the loss of his children, his business and his health. And Job has these wonderful friends who stick by him, asking him what in the world he did to bring this trouble on himself. They assure him that he must have done something bad. They also warn him to be patient, to trust God. When you hear people talk about the patience of Job, that's a funny thing, because Job isn't fully patient. And finally Job blows up – he gets angry at God. He shakes his fist at God and he asks for answers. And what does God say? God says, Job needs better friends – some who can honestly face the truth as Job does. It turns out that God can handle our anger and deal with our questions. It also turns out God doesn't always answer our questions. But God is in the painful place with us and if we are able to really throw ourselves fully onto God, we find that God is near and God is enough.

Sooner or later, every single one of us will get to a place where life isn't working as we'd hoped – there is a loss of control, a place of pain, a place where all we have is God, and our desperate hopes for healing, and this is the place of transformation. Jesus didn't want to go to the cross but he did and it was awful, and he suffered, and he really really died. And in that place of death was resurrection. God transformed all that Jesus had been through and gave him new life. It's important to remember that it was new life. Even his friends didn't recognize him. Things were never the same again. He was not the same, and they were not the same.

When Job had come through the worst of his hard times, his business came back, and he had more children. But I can guarantee you that not a day went by that Job didn't grieve for the children he and his wife had lost. It was not OK. But they had found the presence of God.

Healing would be good. We want it. We really want it. But in those moments where we are finally willing to let go of our own being in charge, our own dignity, our politeness....we find God there. And if we don't, sometimes we can trust that God is working in this place of hardship -- 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus allowed to die, Job.... And perhaps we can find our way to trusting that even though circumstances are bad, even though health or job or relationships may be very bad, we can find our way to affirming that God is good.

We still want the answers. I still want the answers. But I have come to a place of really believing that any god I could fully understand wouldn't be worth worshipping. I don't turn up my hands in resignation and sigh, "It's a mystery...." I throw up my hands in joy and shout, "IT'S A MYSTERY, THANK GOD IT'S A MYSTERY. It's an amazing, confusing, confounding mystery and the only certainty I have in it is that God is, and God is good, and God is enough."

A few centuries ago, Isaac Newton, a deeply religious man, was sitting under a tree when an apple fell on his head...or so the story goes. And Newton thus discovered the law of gravity, and Newtonian physics began to be developed. Actually, Newton himself said, "We stand on the shoulders of giants." He understood that he was only able to see what he saw, to understand what he understood, because of the work of those who came before him. Anyway, with Newton's work, the scientific community began explaining the universe, and the era of rationalism which led to the modern era was born. It has been an era where we have been able to find answers for every question. And because of this, a lot of people of faith have significant distrust of the scientific community – which is a real shame. I believe in math, I believe in physics – they are ways of understanding the marvelous world that God has made. I believe in the human mind, and I believe it can lead us to a deeper understanding of the mystery of God. But I find it interesting that modern physics, quantum physics, is coming around to the answer theology gives – which is to say, "We don't know, and we are beginning to doubt our ability to find the answers. Some of what we observe doesn't seem to make sense, but there it is. It is a mystery." Amen and preach it, brothers!! Life isn't a problem to be solved; it's a mystery to be lived.

A few weeks ago I heard a tape of a sermon in which the preacher described laypeople as simple people uncontaminated by seminary education. I don't know where that preacher got the wrong-headed idea that we Presbyterians don't believe in education – yes, we have an educated clergy –

we have some of the highest educational standards of any denomination. That's a good thing. We have 10 Presbyterian seminaries, educating faithful people who want to serve God. I hope you're not afraid of asking questions – and not afraid of thinking. Our denomination also has 66 colleges and universities. We think education is a good thing, and something that can help us to draw closer to God as we seek to serve and follow the Creator of this marvelous and complicated universe. Some people are afraid of education, and afraid of science and even, God help us, afraid of theology. Perhaps they are worried that God can't handle the hard questions. I don't know – the God I worship welcomes our questions, our challenges, our anger, because that's what life leads us, if we are really grappling with it. Greg Albert, our Associate Presbyterian gave me the Bible I read from this morning, and on the front cover, it says, **THINK.** The Creator of the Universe wants us to explore and think about the wonders of creation. The God of the Bible says “Come, let us reason together.”

I don't have the answers. I don't know why bad things happen to good people. I don't know why good things happen to bad people. I don't know why some people are healed and others are not. I know that the questions are worth asking, and that God is in it all, that God deeply desires our honesty, including our frustration and anger. God is not a larger version of the drive through window where we cry out our desires, get an unintelligible response and perhaps nothing like what we asked for; although it seems that way sometimes. The difference is that God isn't someplace else, God is with us. God is big enough to handle our pain, our anger, our questions, our anguish. What I can tell you is that the people I have known, some of you here in this congregation, who have leaned on God with everything you have had in your place of pain, have found God in the midst of the pain. God is faithful, and God is good. God is near, and God is enough. It's not much of an answer, but it's the only answer. Thanks be to God. Amen.