

“Hope of Healing”

February 4, 2024

Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

When you think about Jesus’ healing ministry, what does it look like? I think for most of us, when we read or hear the stories of Jesus healing someone we assume it means someone came to him sick in some fashion and they left free of that illness. Healing for us is very personal and specific. And that’s certainly what’s portrayed in the gospels.

One of the drawbacks, and even dangers, to reading these stories literally is the belief they can create in some that relying on anything but faith and prayer to treat an illness is forbidden. There are small pockets of Christians who have held that belief over the years. Some of them have even been accused of child neglect when they’ve refused medical treatment for their children for serious illness. In the last few years there’s been an upsurge of resistance to vaccines in our country which is occasionally justified by claiming that God has created us with immune systems to withstand viruses, so we don’t need vaccines. And that’s proving to be more and more dangerous as certain illnesses that were all but wiped out through vaccinations are beginning to make a comeback.

Medical technology and research have led to all sorts of treatments that can heal illnesses in people that past generations, certainly the people in Jesus’ day, could never have imagined possible. It’s hard for us to relate to a time in the world when something as innocuous as a cut or a minor cough could be fatal in the absence of antiseptics and antibiotics. In a world like that, visiting a healer would be part of the first line of defense and not an act of desperation. So, there were people who provided that kind of service, some of them more successfully than others, I’m sure. And the gospels portray Jesus as part of that establishment.

The normal practice of healing would be for a healer to set up shop in a community and have spokespeople, or brokers, bring clients in to receive their services. In our story today we find what appears to be the beginning of that process. Jesus starts healing folks. First, it’s Peter’s mother-in-law, but then it’s the whole city. Everybody is clamoring at the door to be healed. But suddenly it all takes a very different turn. When Jesus wanders off the next morning, probably for meditation and prayer, his four followers come looking for him. Their expectation is that Jesus will set up shop in Capernaum and they will be his brokers; this will be their new profession. But Jesus isn’t interested in that.

For Jesus healing is a sign pointing to the new reality of the arrival of God’s kingdom. For him healing isn’t a commodity, something to be sold in the marketplace. Healing is an affirmation of God’s presence, a tangible expression of hope in a world of despair. For instance, when Isaiah tells the people of Israel who are languishing in exile and feeling abandoned by God that they are not alone, that those who wait on the Lord will increase their strength, he offers them hope to heal their despair and bring them back to life. He asks, “Why do you say, O Jacob,

and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God?’ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth...He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.”

Healing happens when we remember that God is near. That’s what Isaiah is trying to convey to his people. He’s calling them to remember the God who sustains them. And that’s what Jesus is doing in his ministry. He’s proclaiming the kingdom of God has arrived. And he’s inviting anyone who is willing to follow, who is willing to acknowledge that kingdom to turn away from despair and fear and be healed.

Over the years I’ve heard stories of physical healings that are medically inexplicable. You probably have, too. Maybe you’ve experienced that sort of thing firsthand. But those stories are rare. And when you look at the scope and duration of Jesus’ ministry you can see that the number of physical healings he may have accomplished is really very small. He’s calling folks to discover something deeper and broader than physical condition. The healing he offers is for everyone; it’s for anyone who longs to live in closer relationship with God and experience the presence of God’s kingdom in their lives and be free of despair. Healing isn’t just for the lucky few who happen to be in the right place at the right time. It’s not magic. The healing Jesus offers is a new way of seeing and moving in the world; it’s finding hope in our circumstances when all we could see before was fear.

That’s why today you are invited to come forward and be anointed for healing and wholeness. You may be struggling with a physical condition that’s resistant to treatment or you may be struggling with a sense of despair and hopelessness you just can’t shake. Or it may be you just need to renew your connection to God’s presence in your life. Coming forward is an expression of faith. It’s an affirmation that you trust in the God whose understanding is unsearchable, who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

In the end, we’re all in need of healing in our lives at one time or another. We may not always recognize that need but it wears us down nonetheless. Jesus offers us a chance to be healed, to be made whole again. That offer is always there for us. The kingdom is always near; there’s no expiration date; Jesus is always knocking. All we need to do to experience the hope of healing is open the door. Let Christ in and be free.

Amen