

In a perfect world there would be no stories such as the two we have before us today.

The stories that Bill and I read are typical of the healing stories we hear in the gospels; someone is ill or possessed, there is an impediment to their healing, and then they encounter Jesus and they are healed.

These are miraculous healings and we are in awe of Jesus and his power to cure illnesses, drive out demons, and generally bring people back to health and wholeness. And we long for this kind of healing in our lives and in the world. And we think, *in a perfect world there would be no need for miracles because there would be no illness or injury to be healed from.*

We do see miraculous healings today, though we often credit them to medical science rather than faith. Although I think we have to have a lot of faith sometimes to believe in some of the fantastic things that health care providers do these days. From organ transplants to prosthetic limbs that are like something out of *The Six Million Dollar Man* (and if you don't remember that show, God bless you ☺) to surgery to remove cataracts and medicines to allow our brains to function correctly, well, we often hear people who have experienced these kinds of miraculous medical treatments say something like *I never thought I'd get better, but it was just like a miracle!* And yet, we still think, *in a perfect world we wouldn't need healing miracles.*

Several years ago my brother had a leaky heart valve and just like that they put in a mechanical valve and he very quickly regained his health and was back to normal. My sister had a bleed in her brain that required surgery to relieve the pressure and she fully recovered. All of us know people who have had serious health issues—cancer, heart attack, stroke—who fully recovered and went on to lead normal, relatively healthy lives.

And yet, we also know that healing doesn't always happen; we know that our bodies eventually wear out, that there are viruses and bacteria that there is no good treatment for, that mental illness doesn't always respond to medication or therapy. We are all going to die one day and there isn't anything medical science can do about that (well, at least not yet.) Maybe we think, *in a perfect world we'd never die. We'd never feel the pain of loss. We'd never suffer. Wouldn't that be wonderful.*

The woman with the hemorrhage bent down to touch the hem of Jesus' garment and immediately she was healed. Jesus' response to her was *daughter, your faith has made you well.* Jairus fell at Jesus' feet, begging Jesus to heal his daughter. By the time Jesus arrived it appeared that the girl was dead but to Jesus she was only sleeping (or maybe, as we know from the *Princess Bride* movie, she was only *mostly dead, which is still partly alive.*) Even though the mourners laughed at Jesus, he took her by the hand and said, *little girl, get up!* And she did.

For Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage it was the darkest of times. For the man in the tombs who had unclean spirits, it was the darkest of times. For the disciples who believed their boat was going to sink in the waves of the storm, it was the darkest of times. When we lose our loved ones, whether to death or disagreement or disappearance, it is the darkest of times. When we lose our health and cannot live the life God intends for us, whether it is because of age or bad choices or random illness it is the darkest of times. When we see terrible things happening in the world—lives destroyed by war, parents violently separated from children, angry people shooting up offices and schools and movie theaters and other places we've always felt safe, it seems like the darkest of times.

And perhaps this leads us to the real question this text asks us: how do we respond when our pleas for healing aren't answered, at least not in the way we want them to? How do we maintain faith in God when our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears? And what does are we asking for when we ask for healing in the first place?

Michael Lindvall, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Volume 3* writes about a friend of his who was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease while in his mid-50s. Lindvall writes: *He and his wife prayed that he might be healed. Twenty years later, he is in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, he once told me that his prayers had been answered. He said in all sincerity, 'I have been healed, not of Parkinson's disease, but I have been healed of my fear of Parkinson's disease.'* It might seem trite in some circumstances to say that God answers prayers, but sometimes the answer is "no"; but a realistic understanding of healing might bring us to that conclusion. Or perhaps something like "no, but..." with another answer that we hadn't imagined coming forth.

A look at the psalms can teach us about what it means to plead our case before God. Listen to psalm 130, our lectionary psalm for today:

<sup>1</sup>*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

<sup>2</sup>*Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*

<sup>3</sup>*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?*

<sup>4</sup>*But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.*

<sup>5</sup>*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;*

<sup>6</sup>*my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*

<sup>7</sup>*O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.*

<sup>8</sup>*It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*

The psalmist is in deep distress, pleading with God to relieve their troubles. Whether it's illness or other trouble, we don't know, we only know that the psalmist is *in the depths*—for them it is the darkest of times. The psalmist doesn't hesitate to call out to God—even though they seem to feel that it is their own sin that has caused the trouble—and pleads for forgiveness, healing and redemption from their situation.

This is a fairly common theme in the psalms—about 1/3 of the psalms are supplications (petitions or requests for healing.) What is also common is the turn the psalm takes; it begins with this desperate plea; but as the psalmist moves through the psalm desperation turns to hope, and the psalmist enters a time of waiting and hopefulness. By the end of the psalm the psalmist is affirming God's power and praising God for being dependable and trustworthy. Despair has turned to hope; complaint to praise.

I like to say that God is not a magic wish machine; we don't put in a coin or a prayer and get out a gumball or a result. Prayers for healing aren't transactional; there is no quid pro quo or tradeoff of faith for healing. But faith does play a role and perhaps it's in the fact that when we pray we open ourselves to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. We allow God to see our inner selves with all of our need and hope and despair; and even if our wish isn't granted we are changed.

I think of all of the ways that our world needs healing today and sometimes I despair of things getting any better. And some days it's just a matter of putting one foot in front of the other, trusting in God that things will get better—or that I will get better, less fearful, more trusting. Trusting that if I reach out and touch the cloak of Jesus I will be healed. Trusting that as I am healed I, with God's help, can help heal the world. Amen.

