

“God heals sometimes, God saves always”

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 30 June 2024

Lamentations 3:22-33; Psalm 30; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Today we get to talk about healing. Healing in the church can be a touchy subject, especially as it's treated in some faith communities as a kind of faith indicator or holiness gauge. In such communities, healing is treated almost as a kind of proof of faith: it only happens if you have enough faith, and if you don't, the suffering is compounded because it platforms our vulnerability and insecurity.

I didn't know what to make of healing when I was a kid. I would flip past the channel with Benny Hinn, the faith healer, as he smacked people on the forehead and caused them to pass out. I didn't know what to make of such things and so I just...didn't. I'd flip the channel to the Lakers game and forget what I just saw. Such healing spectacles made me uncomfortable.

Today we're not going to flip the channel. Today we're going to talk about healing. And what we'll find is that God heals sometimes, God saves always. The awareness that God heals sometimes and God saves always was an insight that our community here at St. Paul's learned years ago from theologian Sam Wells when we assembled a healing committee to help us develop a theology toward healing. Today we get to witness what this meant for a 12-year-old girl and a bleeding woman, and then we'll explore what their healings might mean for us here today at St. Paul's. What we'll discover is that when it comes to healing, God isn't in a rush. We'll also discover that there's no healing God can't do. And then finally we'll explore what God's not being in a rush and not being overcome by things like death might mean for us at St. Paul's.

One of the more frustrating bits of today's Gospel story is the way in which Jesus is not in a rush to heal Jairus's daughter, who, you will remember, is at the point of death. Is there anything more urgent than being at the point of death? Jesus's actions suggest there is, and it involves a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. Twelve years of bleeding. This woman has been bleeding since the day Jairus's daughter was born. And even though Jairus was a synagogue leader with a young daughter, this bleeding woman was also a daughter, whose suffering mattered to Jesus. Your suffering matters to Jesus, and even though there are others with urgent need, God cares about your healing too. In the kingdom of God, there's no line in the waiting room because God has time for everyone. It's only a different kind of time that will not be rushed.

That God's not in a rush to heal should not be misunderstood to mean that God does not heal. God heals. But as Jesus clarifies at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, healing is not “what [he] came out to do” (Mk 1:38). Clearly, Jesus heals. He heals a lot in Mark's Gospel and the first several chapters in Mark are full of Jesus healing people, whether from unclean spirits, withered hands, paralysis, or full-blown demon possession. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac, a vivid healing story of a man Jesus sets free from

thousands of demons, directly precedes our healing stories today. Jesus could have set up the most successful hospital of all time, but he didn't. That Jesus didn't make healing the center of his mission is instructive for us today. While healing is a function of Jesus's saving work, it is not the center of it. Or, as our healing committee put it several years ago, "healing is a feature of full salvation." So in addition to God not being rushed because God has time for everyone, God's also not in a rush to heal because healing is only part of God's saving action in the world.

Healing – in many forms – is the partial context for our Gospel lesson today. And even though Jesus heals a lot, it is not what he came to do. Healing is not central to his mission, which was to proclaim the message that the "Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15). For Mark, this is the gospel in a nutshell: the kingdom of God has come near. Salvation is at hand, and God's salvation may or may not include our healing from a particular illness or threat of death. This leads us to our second discovery this morning: there is nothing God can't heal us from, even death.

When Jesus paused on his way to Jairus's house and asked "who touched my cloak?" He opened up time for a bigger story of salvation. When we first began our story today, we thought this was about a little girl about to die and a bleeding woman who made her die. But by pausing to invite the healed woman to tell the "whole truth" as Mark puts it, Jesus invites us all to hear a message that has more than healing power. Today Mark invites us to hear a message that has the power to save us.

It's important to note that there is a Greek word for healing that can also be translated as salvation. And that's the word that Mark uses in verse 34: *sozo* (σωζω). When Jesus says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well," he uses the word *sozo*, so this could also be translated as "your faith has *saved* you." So much can be said here, not only about this word *sozo* which can be mean save, heal, and made well, but also about the Greek word *pistis*, which can be translated as "faith," "faithfulness," "belief," and "trust." There's so much to learn about God and God's saving action in this one story, but what I want to underline today is that when the kingdom of God is at hand, salvation is near for those of us who trust Jesus. Trusting Jesus can be challenging, even when we think Jesus isn't in a rush to heal us, help us, or even hear us. But by trusting Jesus, we discover a bigger story of salvation and in this story, we learn that even death is no match for Jesus.

When Jesus raises Jairus's daughter from the dead, we learn why Jesus is not in a rush to heal and why healing is not the whole of the salvation God has for us. Today we learn that death is not the end of the story. This is a churchy, Christiany thing to say, but today we need to let that sink in as we think about pain and suffering in the world around us and in our own lives. Death is not the end of the story. Being at the point of death is not the urgent crisis we might think. What we discover in our Gospel lesson today is that death is not the final word and that there is more to God's salvation for us.

I've just tried to suggest why there are times God doesn't heal. But I want to be sure to acknowledge that healing is a tender subject because it hits us in our deepest vulnerability. When God doesn't heal, it can hit our deepest fears of not being worthy enough for God to do something for us. The Bible doesn't answer the question of suffering for us but as Stanley Hauerwas proposes, the Bible teaches us how to be a community that absorbs the sufferings of others. When God does not offer us healing, God still offers us a community that can hold us in our suffering without ignoring or diminishing our pain. If we receive God's embrace through the church, we will receive a greater gift than healing.

When we see healing as a feature of salvation, and not the whole of it, we can see the story of this little girl as a resuscitation rather than a resurrection. She will go on to die, but the story of God's salvation is life with God forever. Even when she is at the point of death, Jesus is not shook because there is so much more to God's story for her and us. Death has no grip on God's saving power and today Jesus invites us into the wonder of God's power to save.

One of Mark's favorite words for describing Jesus's power is *dynamis* (δύναμις). This is the word Mark uses when he says "power had gone forth from [Jesus]" (Mk 5:30). There are other ways to describe this power, but it's literally like dynamite. When the woman touched Jesus's cloak, dynamite went forth from him. This dynamite was so explosive that it not only healed her, it also *saved* her.

What would it look like for St Paul's to be a community that trusted in the dynamite power of God? What would it look like for us to pray for healing, knowing that God wants that and so much more for us? What if we prayed for God's dynamite action, which sometimes heals us but always saves us, as Sam Wells taught us long ago? I'd like to make three brief suggestions of what it might look like for us to be a community that embraces God's big salvation story.

First, it means we don't rush for healing, but we do find time for salvation. There are so many things today that demand our attention, so many things that impress upon us a kind of urgency that get us rushing about. But today we are invited to center ourselves in the God who keeps clear the center of the story that the Kingdom of God is at hand. That the Kingdom of God is at hand means that we need to turn from anything that is out of step with God's kingdom and trust that God's salvation is bigger than any other concern we might place at the center of our lives. As a feature of salvation, God heals us, but that's not all God has for us. This is why we don't rush for healing, but find time for salvation. In the kingdom of God, we have all the time in the world.

A second way we embrace God's big salvation story is by having imaginations that are shaped by God's wonder. One of my favorite prayers in Morning Prayer is from Ephesians 3:20,21 – *Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.* Glory to God whose power – dynamite –

working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. The same Greek word, dynamis, is used here! We can have big imaginations because God's dynamite is still at work! And dynamite power is working in us for God's glory. Just as the bleeding woman received God's dynamite to heal her, so can we receive God's dynamite power to save us and God's world. When our healing committee composed a statement toward our theology of healing they similarly observed that "healing, like salvation, is a result of synergy, God and his church working together." Having imaginations shaped by God's wonder means that just as God invites us into God's saving work in the world, so also God invites us to participate in God's healing of the world. Healing is a ministry of the church.

A third way we can embrace God's big salvation story is realize that healing is far more ordinary for life with God than we might suspect. As our healing committee stated several years ago, "Whenever and however people are healthy, whole, and healed it is the work of God and part of God's salvation." We don't need spectacles of healing. We need space for healing. That's why we offer healing and anointing regularly here at St. Paul's. Healing is part of God's saving action in the world. Healing is not a litmus test for individual faith. Healing is a gift from God that sometimes comes because we trust God, sometimes happens because others trust God, and sometimes occurs because it's what God does. And also, "not everyone is healed from every affliction," as we learned years ago. We embrace God's big salvation story by putting ourselves in spaces for God's healing, and when God does heal us, we proclaim God's big salvation story by telling the "whole truth" of why we keep reaching out to Jesus for healing.

Make no mistake, God heals us sometimes. But God always saves us. And that God always saves us means that we can live in a big land of holy possibility. That God saves us means we can live in a land of resurrection where we have all the time in the world to make space for God who wants nothing less than to save the whole of us. Thanks be to God.