

Outfoxing Herod: A Ministry of Healing by the Church – Mathias Zahniser

Genesis 15: 1-2, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; and Luke 13:31-35

In the midst of Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:31 and 51), some Pharisees pop up and warn him, "Run for your life! Herod's . . . out to kill you!" "Tell that fox," Jesus replies, "I have no time for him right now. Today and tomorrow I'm busy clearing out the demons and healing the sick; the third day I'll be wrapping things up. Besides, it's not proper for a prophet to come to a bad end outside Jerusalem." [1]

Notice how Jesus describes what he is doing: "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work' (v 32). He is casting out demons and performing cures. But he is not finished yet. Although healing appears to have a very minor role in our readings for today, I will suggest that these readings provide guidance for a ministry of healing by St. Paul's Free Methodist Church., which I would like to describe as outfoxing Herod.

"Fox" here means a "wicked" person who is probably at the same time "cunning and treacherous." [2] Jesus' calls him a fox because Herod is both treacherous and cunning. He's out to kill Jesus because he's afraid of Jesus; and the Pharisees warn him to run and hide because they too fear him.

Prophets represent a threat to wicked, scheming rulers and entrenched religious systems. Jesus is gathering a following; he is coming to Jerusalem, the site of the Holy Temple, the center of Jewish authority, worship, and sacrifice, dominated by the Romans who, along with the Jewish leaders are fearful of a popular uprising. [3]

Herod's supporters, called Herodians (Mark 3:6, and 12:13 // Matt. 22:16) teamed up with the Pharisees to destroy Jesus on two occasions, suggesting that Jesus' popularity, partly due to his success at exorcisms and healing, made him a threat to the religious and political order. The fox that can get into the pen of the church's healing ministry is the fox of fear, not fear like Herod's and that of the Pharisees, but fear of failure. Fear that no one will be healed! These texts help us to outfox fear by showing that healing can take place in an environment of faith, hope, and love.

Let's outfox our fears through faith enhancing scripture:

Our texts suggest this can happen by reflecting intentionally and carefully on the witness of scripture. Since Jesus, himself, used "casting out demons and performing cures" to let that fox

Herod know he intended to continue his mission until it would end in resurrection, is it thinkable that Jesus would abandon us in a ministry of healing?

On the second and third Sundays of Epiphany we read from the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians where it plainly says of the Church, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (v. 27). Furthermore, "gifts of healing" are mentioned twice in that one chapter (vv. 9, 30). Knowing Jesus cast out demons and performed cures and realizing that the Church is his presence on earth after his resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit ought to inspire us with an increase in faith.

Casting out demons would seem to increase fear, not inspire faith. Who wants to come up against demons? In fact, exorcism rarely comes up in our preaching, conversation, and thinking about the mission of the contemporary church. Demon possession has almost no place in our culture, while it was quite common in Jesus' time. I asked a Free Methodist layman, a psychiatrist with long experience in charge of the student health program at the University of Illinois about casting out demons. He said he did not think demon possession in the Gospels was an early label for mental illness. Yet, he said, every suspected case of it at the U of I turned out to be a form of mental illness.

I, myself, had one incident of it in the course of my ministry to students at three institutions of higher learning over a period of 29 years. Some students diagnosed a student I was counseling as possessed by demons. They prayed for his deliverance and, in a final counseling session with me, he told me the demon or demons had left him. I cannot vouch for whether or not it was in fact a demonic possession troubling this student with whom I counseled, but I can vouch for the fact that his troublesome obsession with the Greek word thanatos, "death," ended. As recently as 2010 the Roman Catholics held a major conference in New York City on exorcism in New York City, reported on by the Associate Press.[4] I seriously doubt that anyone will come forward at St. Paul's suspected of demon possession. We will pray for the demons to leave in the name of Jesus.

Let's outfox our fears through faith enhancing worship:

Another way our faith will increase is through the employment of symbols and the use to communal liturgy in healing:

What did you think about the reading from Genesis 15 where God says to Abram?

"I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But . . . [Abram] said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two (15:7-10).

This is a form of worship, an elaborate sacrifice. Sacrifice was the main activity of the Temple in Jerusalem!^[5] The church of Jesus Christ with its central sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the current equivalent! Certainly it is not as awe-inspiring as chopping large animals in half, but nevertheless powerful in its own right with its intimate connection to the central story of our faith, enshrined in the scripture and prayers that make it up. It is another reason why the Church provides an arena for God's healing power to occur. And why we want to do it along with Communion.

When I began to teach a class on cross-cultural formation for missionary- and pastoral-oriented students at Asbury Theological Seminary, Solomon, one of my students, an African pastor who had already started thirty churches in his native Uganda, lamented to me, "I can go out on any day and make as many converts as time permits. It's easy to organize congregations, he said; my problem is not evangelism—and here's his lament—it's discipling. Lots of new believers enter the front doors of the churches, too many of them leave by their back doors."^[6] By discipling, he meant preparing his people to live and face their difficulties and challenges according to the revelation of God in the life and teachings of Jesus and other guidelines of the Bible and church tradition.

The research I did on the subject of cross cultural discipling revealed that missionary candidates were weak on the value of symbol and ceremony, while traditional African religion was rich in both. People responded positively to the Christian story brought by missionaries, but when life's crises occurred: illness, natural disaster, barrenness, job-loss, relational tensions, and the like, they resorted to the ritual events of their primal ritual tradition. Human beings need communal and ritual support for the strengthening of their faith. Rituals employ substances and repeat actions appropriate to the event. Their rituals are alive and create faith. For this reason, the Health and Healing Committee will support following the guidelines of James here at St. Paul's whenever possible in praying for healing:

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14 NRSV)

By strengthening faith through word and sacrament, we can outfox fear.

We can also out fox fear through a perspective of hope:

"Listen," Jesus says, "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work."

Jesus looked beyond the immediate present and even a measure of the immediate future toward "the third day," a reference, so the commentators tell us, to his resurrection.^[7] Jesus can continue his mission of healing in spite of the efforts of that fox Herod and the attempts of the Pharisees to scare him away from it, because he sees beyond the pain and suffering of

betrayal, mocking, scourging, and crucifixion. He can see the hope of the resurrection and the completion of his mission—bright hope on a dark day.

Paul's letter to the Philippians chimes in here:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (3:20-21)

Listen! One thing our committee took great comfort in is the realization that healing of diseases is not the most important thing. Tim Wayman shared with us notes from a chapter he read by Sam Wells, Rector of St. Martin's in the Field Anglican Church in London. Wells wrote "God heals sometimes; God saves always." "Healing," according to Wells, "is the third part of salvation, between forgiveness of sins and eternal life." If there is no forgiveness and no eternal life, healing does not mean much.[8]

It is true that God heals sometimes, not always. That is a fact which cannot be denied. Another mystery that cannot be figured out is the meaning of the distribution of healing.

Here is an example. I met a young woman named Joy also at Asbury Seminary where I Solomon whom I mentioned in connection with ritual. She was a woman of faith. So when I was substitute teaching for a colleague of mine who was about the age I am now and very sick, I asked Joy to pray for him before class started. I happened to be in a brace because of lower back pain that I had had for a number of years off and on. It was great nuisance. After praying for J. T. Seamands, Joy prayed, "And touch Matt's back." Instantly something like an electric current started from my neck, went down my spine and relaxed the muscles in my lower back. I had had that pain off and on since an automobile accident when I was seventeen. It had grown much worse in recent months. It never came back!

A year or two later I read that Joy's husband had contracted cancer. As far as I know he is still alive, but he had operations and was at risk for a good while. Her husband's case was much more serious and life-threatening than my back trouble. To the extent that he was healed, he was healed by traditional medical treatment, plus her prayers, of course, but why not suddenly and completely like my back?

Our committee affirms and our theology supports the work of traditional medicine. We are interested in healing wherever it happens; we are not grandstanding or proving God exists by miraculous events of healing. We affirm the research into, understanding of, and application of healing. We do not claim to understand why my back was healed instantly, apparently in response to Joy's prayer alone and why her husband had to go through all that people go through who have a life-threatening disease.

“God heals sometimes; God saves always.”

Beyond the horizon of all our troubles lies the transformation of “the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Philippians 3:21).

We can outfox fear even further in an atmosphere of love.

“Perfect love casts out [outfoxes?] fear” (1 John 4:18) and we find it in our readings for the second week of Lent where we see the love of Jesus for Jerusalem and its people:

³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34)

And listen to Paul, a follower of Jesus:

[M]y brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved (Philippians 4:1).

Fear of failure in healing can be outfoxed by a faith enhanced by word and sacrament; a hope that looks beyond temporary successes and failures at healings to the permanent healing of the world to come; and a healing ministry that is born of the love of the Lord and his apostles. But let me close where I began with scripture-inspired faith by a story from Acts 3 and 4 of healing that started with a loving look. It takes.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, . . . ² And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴ Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

¹¹ While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s Portico, utterly astonished. ¹² When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You

Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

¹⁶ And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. ¹⁷ “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰ so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, ²¹ who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. (Acts 3:1-21)

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While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, ² much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. ³ So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand. (Act 4:1-4 NRSV)

Let us pray:

Almighty and everlasting God, who can banish all affliction both of soul and body, show forth your power upon those in need, that by your mercy they may be restored to serve you afresh in holiness of living, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

[1] Adapted from The Message Remix, Transl. Eugene Peterson (Colorado Springs, 2003).

[2] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida's, Greek-English Lexicon (New York, 1988: 1.755 (§88.120)).

[3] This Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the Herod of Matthew 2:1, the wise men and the slaughter of innocents. Herod Antipas, is the Herod of John the Baptist who feared that Jesus was the Baptist reborn; he is also the Herod of Jesus' trial (Luke 23:6-12).

[4] The Journal, Martinsburg, West Virginia, November 13, 2010: C1.

[5] The sacrifice performed here by Abram (Abraham) was more precisely an old West Semitic sacrifice sealing a covenant (Jeremiah 34:18-21). Notice that this passage with starry skies above (15:5) and the sacrifice on earth represents an outdoor temple. The smoking firepot and the flaming torch of (15:7) reminds one of the wilderness wanderings after the Exodus of the Israelites (Ronald Hendel, "Genesis," Harper Collins Study Bible (New York, 2006:24).

[6] A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia, CA, 1997:6).

[7] Christopher R. Matthews, "Luke," *Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York, 2006:1792).

[8] Sam Wells, *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith*, Ch. 2 "Does God Heal?" (Grand Rapids, MI, 2011).