

Sermon for Sunday, October 14, 2018 - "Healing - One Step at a Time"

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 14, 2018
Service of Healing, Feast of St. Luke
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Isaiah 35:5-8, Revelation 22:1-6, Luke 4:14-21

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Today as our kids are given their Bibles, we're looking at an aspect of the Bible that is troubling and confusing to many of us, including our kids.

That is, how do we understand stories about healing? Jesus healed lots of people, but why were only some people healed? Why not everyone?

And what do these stories mean for us today? We pray for healing and people still die. And everyone will die eventually, so why even pray for healing?

Some Christian churches use the healing stories as a kind of test of faith, to sort out the true believers from those who doubt. The message is, "Just take a huge, irrational leap of faith and you too can be miraculously healed. If you aren't healed, there must be something wrong with you, guess you just don't have enough faith."

That's not what Lutherans teach about healing at all. We embrace doubt as an important part of faith. We recognize that faith is not our own doing, not something we have to muster up with force and will power. We honor both faith and science.

So, what do we make of these stories?

I think we need a new metaphor to help us interpret them.

These stories don't demand a blind leap of faith so that we too can experience miraculous healing. Instead, they offer us gifts for the journey of faith.

For one thing, they help us to know the God who journeys with us in Jesus. We see just how compassionate God is, how deeply moved by human suffering. We see God challenging the stuff that keeps people excluded and oppressed. According to Jewish law, every single person that Jesus healed should not have even been touched, much less healed. He touched lepers, unclean women, children, the blind, outcasts, Samaritans, Gentiles. As Jesus did that, he defied all the things that keep people down, all the things that separate us from God and each other.

Ultimately, this is what Jesus' death and resurrection shows, too. Jesus defies everything that would keep us down and keep us apart, even death. He cannot be stopped from walking with us and loving us. In Jesus, we have a true companion on the journey. And Jesus works to reconcile us with the other travelers on the way, to bring more companions alongside us. We are not alone and this assurance itself brings so much healing. It is important to note, too, that healing is not the same thing as curing. We can experience healing even as an illness persists, even as the forces of oppression grow stronger, even as we die.

Scripture's healing stories also provide light for the journey. It's easy to get discouraged, to think this valley of shadows is all that there is. Stories of God's healing can be like the sun breaking through the clouds after weeks of dreariness. They give us a glimpse of the bright future God intends for all of creation: a future in which mourning and crying and pain will be no more; those now blind will see and those held captive will be released; waters will break forth in the wilderness, streams in the desert; and there will be a tree of life for the healing of the nations. This is what God intends for creation. It is what God is bringing about through the risen life of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. This vision is healing. It lifts our eyes when they are cast down as we plod through the mud. It gives us greater perspective and hope. It shows us that the powers that be will not have the last word after all.

Finally, the stories of healings give us signposts on the journey, directing us towards the paths Jesus wants us to take. Jesus calls us to walk into God's promised future one act of compassion and inclusion, one step of reconciliation and love at a time. As author Rachel Held-Evans puts it, "The miracles of Jesus ... are instructions, challenges. They show us what to do and how to hope." Rather than a leap of faith, we are invited to walk in faith towards the healing of all creation. And, we have all that we need for this journey: We have the compassionate presence of the risen Jesus and the companions he brings alongside us; we have light for our path and we have guidance along the way. We can walk towards God's promised healing together.

I see this happening in so many ways among us. I see it happening in the Good Shepherd members who are closely accompanying our immigrant neighbors. Their presence is bringing help and healing; real change is happening for our neighbors. Yet, Good Shepherd members are being healed as well. They are sharing in meals with these neighbors, learning their stories, building relationships. The sun is breaking through the clouds of despair and fear.

I saw healing happen when a member of the Worship and Music Committee did devotions last week at the meeting. He shared how troubled he is about the state of our country and then played music that brings healing for him. The sense of deepened well-being in the room was palpable. I think it got us all thinking about how we can be opened to God's healing and let it flow through us into the world.

I see healing happening for a member who is undergoing surgeries and is sensing an invitation to rely on God and other people even more fully in this time and for other members who are grieving openly about recent losses, opening up opportunities for others to walk with them.

I could go on and on. It is my deep honor to get a close-up view of so much healing that is happening amidst our sorrows and pain.

Together, we are walking in God's ways of reconciliation and healing.
Together, we are walking in God's promised future.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.