

Sermon for Sunday, February 7, 2021 - "How We Are Healed"

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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

This story of Simon's mother-in-law hits pretty close to home during a pandemic. She has a fever and we have a whole new sense of how serious that can be. You can't always just take Tylenol and an antibiotic and feel better in a few days. We get that on a really visceral level right now. We also have a deeper sense of what an illness with a fever means for this woman. She has to be isolated from the rest of her family, cut off from regular interaction and her role in their life together. She isn't able to gather with her community of faith for worship. Oh, do we understand how hard that is.

These days we are so very aware of the impact that illness has on individuals and communities. Our longing for healing has deepened. Yet even as we can now more fully understand the impact of this woman's illness, the story of Jesus healing her might seem even more removed from our own experience. What do we mean when we talk about healing and pray for healing as the pandemic rages, as cancer stalks, as illness seems so ever present in our lives? How do we understand healing as the unclean spirits of racism, hatred, and violence run rampant?

As we ponder these questions, I'm struck by one verse in our story today. It speaks volumes about the ways that Jesus healed this woman and heals us today: "Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Jesus comes to the woman where she is, entering her place of isolation. Jesus comes to her home and then to her bedroom. The illness that has cut her off from her family and community cannot cut her off from God. In the same way, Jesus comes to you today where you are - in your home, your place of isolation during this pandemic.

Jesus comes through scripture, sermon, song, art, and through the community that works to offer this time of worship. Jesus comes to bring you healing and help. The healing that Jesus brings this woman, the healing Jesus brings us is more than, and different than, a cure. Jesus raises her to new life. The translation of this passage I just read says that Jesus "lifted her up", but an important connection is lost in translation there. The Greek word used actually means *raise up*. It's the same word used to describe Jesus' resurrection. This word conveys the sense that new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits, or even death, so that they may rise anew.

This same word is used throughout the healing stories in the book of Mark. This work of raising people seems to be the main goal of Jesus' healing work. Jesus' main focus isn't curing or eliminating illness, but rather the renewal of life as God's kingdom comes among us. Jesus raises us up for lives of service.

Speaking of service - I know it sounds strange that right after the fever leaves this woman she begins to serve the men. It sounds like a major gender stereotype, like some bad TV sitcom with a guy in a recliner yelling at his wife, "I don't care if you've been sick, I want supper now." But the Greek here is important, too. The word to describe the way she serves is *diakoneo*, the word we translate as *deacon*. Jesus uses the

word about himself when he says he came to serve rather than to be served. Jesus calls all of his disciples to this type of service. The church uses this word for those who lead others in the ministry of service. Simon's mother-in-law isn't some sitcom caricature. She's the first person in Mark's gospel who exemplifies true Christ-like discipleship and service.

Beloved of God, the risen Jesus is still in the business of raising people up. The primary way this happens for us is through baptism and remembrance of baptism. In baptism we are assured that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, are raised to new life in Christ. This does not mean that illness and suffering are eliminated from our lives. It does mean that those things don't have the power to cut us off from God, from community, or from the renewal of our lives. We are not defined by the things that ail us.

Instead, our lives are defined by what God does for us - the way God names, forgives, and renews us each new day. Baptism also announces our place in the broken and blessed community of the church, the community where we can experience healing and new life, the community in which we are nourished for service. Even when we face illness and can't do the things we once did, we can still serve in many ways. Sometimes the most important service is to bear witness to how God renews our lives even in the midst of suffering.

One way I'm experiencing new life is through my daily practice of yoga and prayer. My body and spirit are lifted up. I am restored. I'm also being nurtured by the gifts of creation. Sunrises and sun dogs, blue skies, moonlight, fresh snow - all of these gifts are nourishing me. I am being challenged, healed and renewed through the work of the Antiracism Task force as we uncover white supremacy culture within and around us. Most of all, I am healed and raised up by what God is doing through this congregation. Even when we can't gather, we are worshipping, reaching out, serving and sharing. This brings such healing and hope. I look forward to celebrating all of that today during our annual meeting.

Where are you experiencing new life? And where are you serving these days?

The pandemic is making it hard to serve in the ways we used to, but it is even more vital. And as we are raised up through the gift of the vaccine, how will we use that gift to serve others? Pastors in Iowa are being vaccinated and I got my first dose two weeks ago. Though I wish that teachers and elders got the vaccine before me, I am asking myself, "What will I do to serve when I've been fully vaccinated?" I look forward to entering places of isolation, into the rooms of our elders in nursing homes to help assure them that their congregation remembers them, that God is present with them. The window visits I've been able to do can convey that to some degree, but in-person visits will mean so much more.

I wonder, too, if I could help others in our county get vaccinated. Our local faith coalition is asking if those who have received vaccines could help with a mass vaccination effort. How will we respond to God's gift of healing through the vaccine to help raise others up?

The healing and new life Jesus gives don't necessarily mean a cure. It doesn't mean the eradication of all illness. It didn't mean that even for Simon's mother-in-law. The fever went away that day, but she died eventually, as did everyone Jesus of Nazareth healed and raised up. Sickness, suffering and death still persist, but because of Jesus they do not have ultimate power over us.

Beloved of God, Jesus comes to you today to raise you to new life, to strengthen you to serve.

Thanks be to God.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.