

Healing & Wholeness

Isaiah 40: 28-31 (Common English Bible)

Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

Mark 1:29-34 (Common English Bible)

After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. The whole town gathered near the door. He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

A physical therapist sent a letter to a friend who is a pastor. Here's what she wrote: "I've been thinking a lot about healing for the past few months... in my work I've met several people with physical problems that my efforts have not been able to improve or alleviate: a lady with constant neck and arm pain even after her surgery, a lady with no return of movement in her left arm and leg eight months after a stroke, a lady with crippling rheumatoid arthritis for fifteen years. All of these are problems physicians have been unable to correct or improve significantly. They need a miracle, and a question keeps coming to my mind. If Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, if he is the same compassionate loving Lord who walked this earth, healing people of their suffering, Why can't we ask for and expect the same miraculous healing in our lives today?"

How many of you have asked that same question? I've asked it standing beside someone in a hospital bed. I cried it out when I have laying in a hospital bed as a patient. What difference does Jesus make when we are sick or when we experience physical pain or suffering? Is God's miraculous power of healing love available to us now?

I've prayed for a lot of people to be healed during my lifetime as a follower of Jesus and the past 37 years as a pastor. I've prayed for many of you and for perfect strangers. Sometimes my prayers were answered. People got better. They were healed. They lived. But many times, my prayers were not answered, at least not the way I wanted.

Both of our readings from God's Word promise healing. Isaiah promises God's strengthening presence to Jewish refugees on the long, perilous road home from Babylon to Jerusalem. "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles." In Mark's Gospel, Jesus first heals Peter's mother-in-law and then "cured many who were sick with various diseases..."

Here is the simple truth I've experienced. God heals in many ways. God heals through modern medicine – surgeons, hospitals and pharmaceuticals. God heals with time and the wonder of the human body, a wonder we take for granted.

God heals in extraordinary and miraculous ways too. A cancer disappears – spontaneous remission. A deadly virus abates for no obvious reason. Prayers are flung at the heavens and somebody who wasn't expected to make it does. It happens. I've seen it. But not always. And that's the flip side to this simple truth. Sometimes people are not healed.

Over the past 19 years, we've had "A Service for Healing and Wholeness" a couple of times a year. I believe it's important to have both. We dare to pray for healing. We pray people might be cured of their diseases or freed from their demons, just as Jesus did. But we also pray for wholeness.

Wholeness is bigger than healing. Wholeness is the peace, the acceptance, the integrity, the trust God always offers, healing or not. Sometimes wholeness comes with healing. Sometimes wholeness comes without it. It's possible to be healed and be whole. But it's also possible not to be healed, and still be made whole. Sometimes God offers healing. God always offers wholeness.

The Reverend Bob Davis, a pastor in Miami, Florida for 14 years, made an announcement his congregation wasn't ready for. For several Sundays, he preached on the healing power of God. As the members listened to this fifty-two-year-old former all-American football player, their eyes filled with tears. He had Alzheimer's disease and must resign.

Bob said: "Today my ministry draws to a close and I can say with Paul, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now I stand at the finish line in victory, because God set the distance I was to run..." When asked, "What about miracles?", Bob answered, "I am like Paul, whose thorn in the flesh God did not remove. I don't expect God will remove my Alzheimer's thorn." But he said at the last, "I have made up my mind to find joy in weakness...a deeper experience of the power of Christ." Bob Davis was not healed. But he was made whole. God sometimes offers healing; God always offers wholeness.

A young father wrote an essay about God's healing and wholeness. He and his wife have two children with regressive autism. Both children have lost their ability to sing, to clap, to hold spoons. Their parents and their church have prayed for them, prayed their hearts out. But his children have not been healed. Mostly, they've got worse.

The father wrote about different kinds of healing. First, he believes in miraculous healing, the stories in the Bible, the kind of inexplicable healing all of us have heard about. A second kind of healing is the body heals itself. A virus attacks your body and your white blood cells kick in. A third type of healing is you break a bone and the doctor puts a cast on it. Or a surgeon cuts out the tumor, or the antibiotics or the chemo work – modern medicine. It often heals, but not always.

The fourth type of healing was described with the majestic vocabulary of First Corinthians: "The trumpet sounds and the dead are raised in the twinkling of an eye, never to perish again.

Corrupted bodies become incorruptible; sickness and affliction never befall them. The sterile smell of the operating room corridor is no more...Every deaf ear is unblocked, every damaged limb is repaired, every blind eye sees. Autism, Down syndrome, Schizophrenia, Alzheimer's are swallowed up in victory. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Nobody cries, except with joy."

Beloved, bred into the bone of Christian conviction is the mysterious but irreducible trust that with God there's a final healing – a consummate wholeness beyond this veil. The father of those two little ones with regressive autism concluded his essay with these daring words, "God never says no to a request for healing. God either says 'Yes,' or 'Not yet.'" God sometimes offers healing. God always offers wholeness.

I believe that God heals in all sorts of ways – medical, miraculous, natural. All of them begin and end with God. I also believe in the possibility of wholeness, that healing-beyond-healing, the healing of spirit and soul. Wholeness comes to us in this life. A person is not literally healed, but she lives her days with joy and meaning. A person is still physically ill, lives his life with acceptance and peace.

When sociologist and pastor Tony Campolo preaches, he offers to anoint people with oil and pray for them after worship, even though nothing sensational happens. Once at a church in Oregon, as worship ended, Tony said "...if anyone wanted to remain behind for healing, I would be glad to pray with them... Surprisingly, about thirty people stayed behind and waited patiently as I prayed for one after the other."

Tony said, "I did not want to do this healing thing fast, like some of the healers I see on television. I wanted to really talk to a person before I prayed and get a feel for what was on that person's heart. I wanted to hug each person and connect with him or her as deeply as I know how. I did that with each of the people who stayed behind, and in each case, I put some olive oil on each of their heads...What intrigued me was most had nothing physically wrong with them. One man needed healing for an addiction to pornography. One woman wanted healing for her marriage. Someone else asked healing for anger. But there were a few who had physical illnesses."

Four days later, Tony got a phone call. The woman at the other end said, "Tony, on Sunday you prayed for my husband. He had cancer." When I heard the word 'had' my heart quickened a bit. "Had cancer?" I asked. The woman answered, "Well, he's dead now." When she said that I thought to myself, *A lot of good I do.*

Then she said, "When my husband and I walked into that church on Sunday, he was angry with God. He had cancer and he knew he was going to be dead soon, and he hated God for letting it happen. He wanted to see his grandchildren grow up more than anything. At night he would lie in bed and curse God. It was horrible. And the angrier he got toward God, the meaner he was to everyone around him. It was unbearable to be in the same room with him. His nastiness just kept getting worse and worse and worse. But then you laid hands on him on Sunday morning and you prayed for him. When he walked out of church I knew something was different. I could feel it. He was a different person. The last four days of our lives have been the best four days we've ever

had together. We talked and laughed. We even sang hymns with each other. It was a good, good time."

She paused, then said something profound. She said, "Tony, he wasn't healed, but he was made whole." Sometime God offers healing. God always offers wholeness.

June 27, 2021

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