

Called to Healing
Epiphany 5B
PPC
7 February 2021

Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1:29-39

They were probably hoping for a short rest at Simon's mother-in-law's house. Immediately, though, they encounter illness and a need for healing. In bed with a fever, she is in isolation from the rest of the household and can't assume her role as chief cook and star of the hospitality committee. Her illness places her in isolation. Mark, through his spare prose, asks the question, "if we can't find our place in community, how do we belong and how do we know who we are?"

That's a question on many of our minds as face Year 2 of this pandemic. The global health crisis leaves us feeling very vulnerable as we grapple with social isolation. We have had to be creative in finding ways of doing ordinary jobs in a new way. February often brings the winter doldrums and now we have an illness, spread across the globe. Here, in the US we look out at the violence and the hateful language that is spewed. Threats to kill politicians who are perceived as the enemy are ignored by some in Congress who brush those comments aside in the desperate attempt to hold onto power.

Theologian Kristine Culp, in her book, *Vulnerability and Glory*, reframes our view of what is happening by making the claim that vulnerability is the pivot of salvation. In other words, the mental, spiritual, physical, and political vulnerability that exists now might be a turning point that transforms us, providing an opportunity for change. Perhaps we can repent, turn our heads in another direction, and find new ways of thinking and doing. Vulnerability may not sit so well with us and our fellow Americans

given the high value we place on self-sufficiency and independence. Who wants to feel vulnerable?

The Isaiah of Chapter 40 is speaking to a people in exile. The first words of this chapter are the familiar words sung by the tenor in *Messiah*. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” This is a people who may feel that they’ve slipped off the divine radar. Why has God abandoned them? How could this have happened to God’s chosen people? Isaiah challenges them as they ask their questions, “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God’?”

We may not be experiencing life in exile, although many theologians, Walter Brueggemann especially, have written about how living at this time in the US may feel like we are in exile. We are, though, living through a pandemic. This certainly feels exile-like. We can’t travel. We can’t go grocery shopping without a mask. We are urged to stay home as much as we can.

What will it take for healing to take place?

Jesus heals the sick mother-in-law with no special words said, no prayers offered over her suffering body; he does nothing more than take her hand and lift her up. What a powerful gesture this turns out to be. His touch brings her from “un-wholeness” to “wholeness”. Mark uses this touch as a metaphor for intimacy, for presence, for relationship. This first healing is accomplished simply through a connection made.

Much has been written on this short text that focuses on the healed woman’s next move. She gets up and serves the disciples. “There’s no clear agreement about

how to view that service: is this one more woman (no matter how sick she's been) who has to get up and take care of the men who apparently haven't learned how to take care of themselves?"¹ For the millennia of expectations that women are to serve the men, there is a larger message here.

What does it mean to be a servant? Perhaps Jesus and this unnamed woman are part of a dance wherein we come to learn what Jesus is really about: wholeness, healing, service, humility. Beverly Gaventa reminds us that Jesus will later try to get his disciples to understand what it really means to be his disciple. It is not about power which may often come in the shape of being able to heal others. Following Jesus and becoming a disciple is about learning how to serve.

I must add, in the midst of this pandemic, that those medical professionals - doctors, nurses, researchers, nurse's aides and all of those who are working so tirelessly to help us stay well - are true servants. The point isn't about the ability to miraculously heal. I imagine these health care workers aren't working tirelessly for the glory, the money, or the power. They serve us because they care. Their service is given out of concern for others. We give much thanks for those among us who serve the greater community in this way.

We want to believe that by seeking perfection or healing that our lives will find wholeness when what we keep discovering is just how broken we are. St. Anthony the Great concluded that we should "expect trials until our last breaths." This doesn't mean we throw up our hands and live as helpless or hopeless victims.

¹ Kate M. Huey at: <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-5-2012-sunday.html>.

Isaiah points the way to healing in the midst of great pain, or exile or pandemic. He takes the majestic God of creation as the springboard for addressing the vulnerability of exiled people. He turns our attention to the stars: “God stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in...Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? [God] who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them by name; because [God] is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.” We can take from this that the God who created all things and continues to sustain them is also paying attention to the particularities of our situation. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson “God makes the world, in other words, by empowering the world to make itself.” In a world weary and exhausted from an invisible virus, this very God who governs and gives strength, makes it possible for life to be given to the faint and strength to those who are powerless.

Roger Gench, in his essay in “The Outlook” this week tells this story about Ida B. Wells, as related by James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Wells was a journalist, educator, and early leader in the civil rights movement. She lived out this kind of faith confidence and was a pioneer in the anti-lynching movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Her voice was one that awakened the conscience of the nation as she wrote tirelessly about the horrors of lynching despite the fact that her work was shunned by white Christians and even some Black ministers. When asked what sustained her, she always spoke of her faith, formed and nurtured by her ex-slave parents. Hers was a faith defined by the cross of Jesus and Black resistance to white supremacy. Cones relates the story of Wells’ clandestine visit - in disguise and at risk for her life - to 12 condemned Arkansas prisoners who had survived the

massacre of nearly 300 Blacks in Elaine, Arkansas, in 1919. When she heard the prisoners insist that “we are innocent, but all we can do is pray to the Lord and sing and time passes on,” Wells admonished them with these words: “Why don’t you pray to live and ask to be freed? The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened the prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that God will open your prison doors, too.” Eventually, they were acquitted by the Supreme Court and one of the freed prisoners told Wells’ family that after her visit, “we never talked about dying anymore, but did as she told us, and now every last one of us is free.”

What does it mean to be healed? For those ancient exiles and contemporary ones - any who find themselves in isolated, vulnerable circumstances - Isaiah brings very good news. Jesus teaches us that healing comes first by serving others. This is a time for us to spend time in consideration - in prayer - discerning what God is calling us to do and be.

Our lives mean something. In the midst of the pain and suffering, of over 440,000 deaths from COVID 19, of political upheaval and the power of liars, our lives mean something because God loves us. Being alive, connecting with others even if we can only do that through Zoom right now, we can find those God moments. On the next clear night, look up at those millions of stars shining down on us, spend time in watching the snowflakes as they lazily fall to earth. Love well all those who live within your household. Remember those who spend these days alone.

Can you picture those in the slave quarters, singing around a common fire, remembering who they were and from whence they came? They were creating their

own vision of the kingdom of God. That is what we are called to do in these most difficult days when we are feeling so vulnerable. What are the new things that God will bring about?

This is what Jesus brought to those small towns dotted across the Galilean countryside, living lives of desperation as the Romans and the Jewish leaders took everything they had. These were people who struggled against Roman occupation, extreme poverty, and unjust leadership. How were they ever going to find relief and healing? Where was God. Where would they find hope?

Isaiah tells us: “[God] gives power to the faint; and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:30-31).

AMEN.