May 26, 2019

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Names for God – The Lord Who Heals

Exodus 15: 22-26

Mark 2: 1-12

In her sermon on May 5, Susanne introduced this series of sermons on names for God. She spoke about how God is a mystery beyond human understanding, but that the Godself has been made known to us in the various ways we relate to God. From those experiences have emerged different names for God. As I reflected on what to speak about today, it was the theme of God as Healer that resonated with me the most and so I have decided to explore that. Just as no one name can encompass the wholeness of God, what I have to say will not capture the fullness of God as Healer but hopefully there will be some truth in my words.

I had prepared an earlier draft of this sermon and sent it to Susanne for comment, and she politely pointed out that I had overlooked including an Old Testament reference. So I set about looking for an appropriate scripture and discovered the passage from Exodus that Geraldine read. I am not a biblical scholar and don't speak Hebrew, but using the almighty power of Google I learned that the last portion of verse 26 translates into a name for God: Jehovah-Ropheka, or "The Lord who Heals". The passage describes Moses essentially "healing" a body of water to make it fit for the grumbling Israelites. This was a demonstration of God's power to overcome any impurity, contamination or corruption on behalf of his chosen people. The concept of Jehovah-Ropheka is expanded on in the Old Testament to encompass the power to heal physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

In the New Testament the Lord who Heals becomes manifest in the person of Jesus. In Luke 4: 17-21 we read of Jesus reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and announcing his ministry as follows: to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

According to what we read in the gospels Jesus proceeded to go about filling this scripture by quite literally bringing sight to the blind, and performing numerous other miraculous healings. Among them Jesus healed a leper, a withered hand, a deaf/mute man, a woman with bleeding, drove out evil spirits, and even raised three people from the dead - including Lazarus who had been in the tomb for 4 days. People who needed healing instinctively came to him, and from what we read, he provided it. Jesus as healer is a dominant theme of the gospel narrative.

Since the time of Jesus, accounts of miraculous healings have continued. One of my former taxi drivers who is now retired has such a story. I don’t know the details, but the broad strokes go something like this. Jim came out of his shower one day into his bedroom, where he had a catastrophic cardiac event and collapsed on the floor. He lay there for 45 minutes before he was taken to hospital and revived after being shocked multiple times, but according to the doctors he was clinically dead for several minutes. They don’t have an explanation for why he is alive. Jim does. He says that when he died he saw Jesus and was healed by Him. Jim has not wasted this second chance and he has transformed his life. In his work as a driver of a wheelchair accessible taxi he often drove people going into or out of hospital. Jim would take the opportunity to talk with these people, to pray with them, and to share the love of God. Jim displays an amazing openness, a passion for God, and uses his life to impact other people.

As much as I rejoice in Jim's renewed life, I must admit there is an aspect of stories like his and the gospel miracles that bothers me. When I had my injury at 17 years old I know that there were many people who were praying for me to be healed. But I did not walk out of that hospital. Why not? Did we not pray the right words? Did I not have enough faith? Did God not love me? Was God punishing me for living a sinful life, or trying to teach me some sort of lesson?

I suspect probably everyone here can relate to what I have just described in some way – having prayed for healing for yourself or a loved one that didn’t come. The need for healing is not limited to physical ailments – people suffer from addictions, broken relationships, mental illness, the effects of abuse and any number of other issues. This world has lots of brokenness. Our instinct is that a loving God should act to take away the pain associated with all these things, and when that doesn’t happen this has serious implications for how we relate to God as Healer. In preparing to speak today I have been struggling with formulating some thoughts that will hold some meaning on this dichotomy between stories of radical healing and stories where healing didn’t seem to come. I’m going to suggest 3 points in response to that: 1. praying for healing is natural and good; 2. sometimes divine healing happens; 3. when divine healing doesn’t happen, there is still a role for both us and God.

We no longer have the ability to track Jesus down on his journeys through the Galilean countryside or to grab the fringe of his cloak to draw out some of his power. Without a physical presence, our conduit to God is through prayer. Just as it was natural for people in Jesus’ day to seek him out for healing, it is instinctive today for us to reach out to God in prayer when we are in need. In his book “Finding God in the Waves” Mike McHargue describes his journey from evangelical Christian, to atheist, and back to faith. During this middle period his dad suffered a serious stroke. He writes about his reaction after hearing the doctors say the prognosis was uncertain:

“What else was there to do but pray? So we prayed, and we asked others to pray. I actually got on my knees – literally kneeling – and asked God to help my dad. … I did this even though the idea of a God who intervenes when we pray makes me wonder why some prayers get answered with a ‘yes’ while others get answered with ‘your father will never walk again.’”

Experience tells us we cannot expect God to act like a genie who will grant whatever we wish for. Still, when there is need for healing it is important to lift others in prayer and to make our petitions known to God.

I believe that sometimes God will answer “yes” to those prayers in profound ways. It is tempting to discount the biblical accounts as fanciful tall tales, or stories like Jim’s as some kind of delusion. Unfortunately the very real pain and desire for healing people experience has sometimes been manipulated by those providing false cures, and I can offer no proof or first-hand account to support that divine intervention is real. But if I believe in a God that created the world, I should also believe that same God has power to perform other acts which are beyond our understanding. I do not have to accept every claim of divine healing as true to accept that some are. I can offer no other explanation for Jim’s life other than the one he does – he experienced miraculous healing through God. There is no question that Jim's life has been radically transformed, his story is one of hope that is worth telling.

Despite what I have just said, we also know that the overwhelming majority of people who are broken physically, mentally or emotionally do not receive dramatic healing regardless of the strength, frequency or content of their prayers. It is natural to ask why. I do not have an answer for that which is likely to satisfy anyone who is struggling deeply with that question. I do not think it has anything to do with praying the right words, lack of faith, lack of love from God, or divine punishment. Part of my response is that Jesus’ ministry was not just about bringing healing himself, but also to say that we have a part in establishing God’s kingdom. In other words, part of his commission to us is that we must be active in offering healing to the world. The other part of my response is that even when there isn't healing, maybe God is still there.

I chose the story of the paralytic for the scripture reading today, not because of the nature of what was healed, but because it touches on the two things I have just mentioned. The first part of this story I notice is that Jesus is not the only one who is active in this healing. Mark’s account paints quite a picture. Upon Jesus’ return to Capernaum word went out on social media that he was back and a huge crowd gathered. I imagine a similar scene on Patrick’s first Sunday back from sabbatical. Four people bring a stretcher carrying a paralyzed man. Clearly they see this as a chance for him to be healed, but the crowd is too big to get to Jesus so they improvise. They somehow get the mat and the paralyzed man onto the roof, remove a section, and lower him down to where Jesus is. Now I understand that roofing materials in 1st century Palestine likely weren’t quite what they are today, but still, that is dedication. I have to wonder if the paralyzed man was fully on board as he was being hauled up to the roof, but everyone should have friends that dedicated. My point is, sometimes for healing to occur it is going to require some work from us, and that work might be difficult.

In Matthew 25 Jesus' commission to us it is to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the prisoner. In other words, to be agents of healing. There are remarkable stories of churches, organizations and individuals acting on this call. And this call is still there for us today. Whether it is building hospitals, advocating for a better healthcare system that addresses mental health needs, participating in reconciliation with indigenous people, reaching out to a friend who is hurting, or countless other examples both large and small – our faith calls us to take actions like this that bring healing. How we live and what we do matter. The actions, attitudes, words, and thoughts that fill our days can contribute to healing.

The other aspect of the story of the paralytic that I notice is that before there is any healing, Jesus did something else for the man. He forgave his sins. The scribes in the story get caught up in the theological implications of Jesus’ words, but to me this speaks of God being present and addressing the man’s spiritual needs as the first priority. God’s love can come to us in more ways than direct healing.

A few weeks ago Susanne referred in one of her sermons to the book "Everything Happens for a Reason – And Other Lies I've Loved" by Kate Bowler. It is a book I have also read, a memoir of Bowler’s journey after being diagnosed with colon cancer at age 35. In one section she describes having written publicly about her experience for an article in the New York Times, which prompted hundreds of letters in response. She highlights one particular letter from a man who was taken hostage with his wife and daughter and witnessed a neighbor being hanged, but knows that God was there during this ordeal through the indescribable peace he felt. This resonated with Bowler who describes how when she was sure she was going to die, she didn't feel angry, she felt loved. She goes on to describe how she began to fear losing this feeling, and asked friends, pastors and theologians about it. Yes, they assured her, this feeling would go away. But, it will leave an imprint, a mark of the presence of an unbidden God. She writes on as follows:

"It is not proof of anything. And it is nothing to boast about. It was simply a gift. I can't reply to the thousands of emails with my own five-step plan to divine health or a series of powerful formulas which guarantee results. I suppose I am like the man who wrote to me to say he had seen a friend swinging from a tree and felt the presence of God in the same long, dark night."

Some of you will be familiar with author Rachel Held Evans who very recently passed away. I immediately went to Google and learned she had passed away the day before after. She was 37 and died of extensive brain swelling leaving behind a husband and two young children. She has written and spoken openly – and in my view, profoundly – about her journey with doubt and how she left and then came back to the church. If you have wrestled with questions about your faith but aren’t prepared to just dump everything, you should read Rachel Held Evans. Her last blog entry was on March 6, Ash Wednesday, in which she wrote the following:

“It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on. Whether you are part of a church or not, whether you believe today or you doubt, whether you are a Christian or an atheist or an agnostic or a so-called “none” … you know this truth deep in your bones: ‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.’ Death is a part of life. My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone. “

It is natural that we pray for healing, and important that we do so even when we don’t know what the results will be. How the Lord who Heals responds will be up to God. Sometimes healing may come instantaneously and miraculously. Sometimes healing will be a journey, and may come through the hands of others or in ways we did not expect. And sometimes it might not come, but we pray that God will still be there to help us. Ultimately our hope is in the resurrection, in Jesus victory over death. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “by his stripes we are healed”. Amen