

“Lifted into Community”
February 7, 2021

Isaiah 40:27-31
Mark 1:29-39

Last Thursday I sat safe and warm in my home, watching the snow fall, remembering the description in Christina Rossetti’s poem: “Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow.” That’s how it’s been in recent weeks—and we had a similar experience on Saturday.

We were all advised to stay home—and I took that advice, glad that I had done so as the wind gusts blew the snow across the yard first one way then another.

A snow day! Such wintry days off are not fading as online classes call students to school even in blizzard conditions. And, of course, the emails and phone calls keep coming as we work from home as well.

There used to be something about a snow day that we would welcome: that chance to stay home, to enjoy a cup of tea, to work on a postponed project, or to simply spend some time with family as the children enjoyed the day off as well in the weather imposed isolation. We knew it was only temporary. The snow would end, the shovels and snow blowers and plows would come out and we would get back to work and school and the rest of life.

Now the isolation of a snow day is only a continuation of the isolation of these ongoing pandemic days and months and...year. To a greater or lesser extent, we are all isolated, enduring separation from family and friends and congregation, seeing co-workers only during those endless Zoom meetings, missing the handshake, the hug. “Social” distance feels mostly like just *distance*.

We know how illness breaks our contact with each other.

We remember those stories in the Bible of lepers who were viewed as “unclean” and were required to keep their distance.

We remember the early days of the AIDS crisis, during which misinformation and a lack of understanding combined with bigotry and hatred resulting in countless people being cut off from family and friends and congregations and co-workers and the larger society.

With that history and in our current isolation, we can hear more clearly—if also more painfully—the Gospel story of illness and separation. This is, of course, a story of healing as well, but it doesn’t start that way.

Mark tells it in the simple and quick style of that Gospel: Along with his first four disciples, Jesus enters the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law—we don’t know her name, we are *told* her name—is in bed with a fever.

Illness separates us. We are too weak or too contagious or too tired to be with others. In a sense, that’s all right—we need to rest and to return to health. But we also know that there are times

when we can be too weak, too contagious, or too tired for others to want to be with us. Family stops coming around. Friends stop calling.

They tell Jesus about this woman “at once.” Mark’s gospel always has a sense of immediacy. Everything comes with a pressing urgency—and we know that life can be like that.

Ignoring some customs and breaking other cultural norms, Jesus, a man, goes to this woman. Jesus, who is well, goes to the one who is sick. Jesus, an outsider, goes to this woman’s bedside. He touches her, bridging the distance that illness imposes.

And Jesus lifts her up. Those who heard this story for the first time—maybe early Christians in the first century or maybe you this morning—would not have known, but this is the same expression used for the resurrection of Jesus at the end of this Gospel. He, too, is “lifted up”—brought out of the separation of death, restored to life and to community with others.

As this Gospel begins, as we watch this healing, we are also witnesses to a little resurrection. Jesus “lifts up” Simon’s mother-in-law, the fever leaves her, her isolation ends, and she is brought back to life with others.

Now, this is where the story gets interesting—or becomes a problem. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the translation we read here in worship each week, tells us: “The fever left her and she began to serve them.” Hmm. One paraphrase goes so far as to say: “She got up and made them dinner.”

OK.

We’re left with the troubling feeling that this woman—who is not even named—is healed simply so that she can resume taking care of the men in the house, including this stranger.

But the New Testament scholar Mary Ann Tolbert told us years ago in the *Women’s Bible Commentary* that our discomfort might be caused by a faulty translation. Rather than *serve*, a better description of what Simon’s mother-in-law does here is *minister*. That’s how the same word is translated earlier in this same chapter, where the angels are said to *minister* to Jesus as he is tested in the wilderness. “What the angels could do for Jesus in the wilderness,” Tolbert says, “This woman now does in her house.”

Restored to health, lifted up, she resumes her position in her home, once more having the privilege of sharing hospitality with important guests. It is, says another New Testament scholar, PHEME PERKINS, “a matter of honor, not servitude.”

So Perkins affirms that there is a spiritual dimension to healing. Most of us, she says, “have experienced the joy of better-than-expected healing *and* the pain and anger of medical complications or the death of someone we loved.” Because of this, she says, it is difficult to hear stories about Jesus healing and not feel cheated. Why, we ask, did the healing we sought or prayed for not happen?

And yet, by faith we say that the One who shows God’s power in healing others also knew suffering and death.

There is much about this story of healing that puzzles and confounds us.

There is much about *all healing* that puzzles and confounds us.

What we might begin to understand in any case is that healing comes with a calling, and opportunity. We are restored and brought back into community so that we might live even more fully with one another.

Healing breaks forth into ministry and ministry breaks forth into healing.

We look at what happens as the sun sets. People arrive at this house bring those who are sick in so many different ways. Mark exaggerates, I think, but we are told that “the whole city was gathered around the door.” And Jesus cured many.

Our lives begin to encounter the good news of this particular story of healing.

As individuals, as a nation—as a *world*—we are waiting for healing, for an end to this pandemic and the isolation and disruption it has brought. We have been separated from each other for so long. And that separation has been especially difficult when those we love have faced illness or death. Times when we would normally rush to be with others have become occasions that only heighten the pain of separation.

We have greeted the arrival of vaccines with joy and hope, even as we have become aware that their distribution is a race against time as the virus develops new variants.

We know what it means to grow weary.

Who will lift us up?

By faith we affirm that through scientific endeavors, medical understanding, and government effort God is lifting us up. We find ourselves strengthened by God’s great, healing love. This is the God who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless—people like you and me.

We find ourselves healed, we find ourselves with new strength, we find ourselves lifted up—but these are not ends unto themselves, as good as they are.

We are healed to bring healing to a broken world, to our nation shattered in so many pieces that each of us needs only to look around to find one place that calls for your healing actions.

We are given new strength so that we can work with those who are weak and weary—and you know they are many.

We are lifted up so that we might show the power of the resurrection that brings new life in to those who have been cut off.

The day is coming. It is not here yet. But we will be restored to one another and once more become a community of wholeness for one another and for this world. And look! Even now God’s healing power is at work within us and among us.