

THE HEALING AND SAVING POWER OF GOD

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

He was healing and recovering well. Gordon had had a stroke. Thankfully, it hadn't affected his mind or speech much at all. He was a little unbalanced however, and the therapy was focussed on getting him up and walking again.

But then, there was a sudden turn. Hard to explain really. Internal bleeding started and it was so bad that from being in a healing situation with a positive prognosis, Gordon was transferred to palliative care. There, the focus was managing his pain and making him as comfortable as possible until the end. And it didn't take long. Gordon died within a week.

What happened? Why did it happen? No clear answers were available. The doctors, nurses and staff did everything they could. Gordon's family were there by his side all the way. Some things just don't have a good explanation.

But is this it? As Christians, should we not expect something more? Should we not expect a better result or some deeper meaning? Where is God in all this? How do we pray in all this? What can we believe in all this?

Our Scripture readings, I think, give us some concrete direction. But in order to hear God speaking to us through them, we need to wrestle with them a little. Let's begin with Isaiah. First, let's listen to the prophesy in a more straightforward way. It begins by contrasting God's power to the vulnerability and fragility of life in the world. Whether you're a prince or a grasshopper, you are here today and gone tomorrow. But even more, those who make themselves out to be something will soon realize that they are nothing: "It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers... It is God who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when the wind blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble." Wow, how depressing this all sounds! How fragile and passing life is.

At the same time, though, the God who humbles the great and brings them to nothing, is also the God who by contrast: "brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing."

This contrast is important, especially for a small nation like Israel. They are tossed and trampled by the big powers, by princes and kings who overrun and enslave them. What this prophecy is saying is that God is almighty to deliver. The same God who can bring to nothing the powerful, can lift up the lowly. "Don't worry, dear Israel. Your God has not forgotten you. Your God has the power to make things right."

But clearly, many Israelites need convincing. For in the very next set of verses, there is questioning: "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?'" In other words, many Israelites are questioning whether God is, indeed, almighty to bring down their oppressors and deliver them. 'Is our situation so hidden from you, O God? Or have you just forgotten us?'

Well, the prophecy answers this question by ending with a great promise: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless... 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."

In other words: 'Be patient. God has not forgotten you. Wait upon the Lord. Trust God. Salvation is on the way. Healing and restoration will come.'...But what does this mean, really? Who can bring back the dead? Who can restore what's lost? How can anything good come out of so much that's bad?

Well, either the people will keep waiting on God, waiting for some kind of healing and salvation, or, they will give up waiting and give up on God altogether.... Many Israelites did just that. 'Times up, dear God. We're not waiting patiently for you any longer. Either you've forgotten us, given up on us, or maybe... maybe... you don't exist at all and we imagined you all this time...

Now to be fair historically, no one in the ancient world could imagine a world without God. Events were interpreted with God somewhere in the picture. Bad things had to be because God was angry or God was taking sides with my enemy against me. Good things had to happen because God was happy with me, or, my God was stronger and more responsive than my enemy's god because I was more faithful in my devotion, sacrifice and prayer. One way or the other, God was in the picture making things happen.

But in our world, an increasing number of people are giving up on God and the idea of God. Does it make a difference to believe in God? Can what happens in the world be understood much better without God behind it all controlling what happens and to whom?

Well, the scriptures actually address this kind of challenge. But unless we are forced to give up our more literal ideas about God and our more literal expectations of God, we will never find our way to a more profound discovery of God and a deeper connection with God. Can God heal and save us? Can God heal and save us even when things can change in an instant and we are in a bad situation beyond our control?

Let us bring in our gospel reading for some answers. God can heal and save us. But in order to discover ways in which God can heal and save us, we have to let go the literal expectation that I will get back to where I was before. Life is always changing. That's the way it is. If I'm sick, my healing and salvation won't necessarily be by getting well

the way I was before I got sick. Maybe healing and salvation will come in another way altogether. So what other way is possible?

1) First, our gospel reading reveals Jesus as a remarkable healer. But how do those who experience healing respond to Jesus? What does Simon's mother-in-law do once her potentially fatal fever is healed? "She began to serve them."

And this is the first point we need to understand about how healing and salvation are opened up for us. In the face of the pain and suffering in the world, we are called to serve and bless others. We are called out of our own self-preoccupation and self-pity – all that blocks us from really experiencing salvation and healing. There are always choices before us, even when we are backed into a corner with apparently nowhere else to turn. To turn to God and to pray through our situation is to discover ways we can be, even ways to accept what is happening so that we break free of the prison of our resentment and hopelessness.

Serving others, caring for them, reaching out to them, being there for them, listening to them, helping them heal... It's a way for us to discover new life for ourselves, a new way to experience healing and salvation in ourselves we never knew the same before. It's new because the circumstances in our lives are new. We need it new because the old is no longer adequate. God is always bringing new opportunities for us to experience healing and salvation. But God's way doesn't involve some divine intervention where our situation is just erased. No. We find new healing and salvation by God working in us through our troubles and challenges, finding new ways of being and loving. That's how we grow and blossom.

So then, first and foremost, Jesus the healer is calling disciples to follow him in his healing ministry. What are our gifts, talents and abilities all about? We only discover these as we try things and as circumstances and situations challenge us to move beyond our comfort zones to new relationships, new commitments and new practices. Life forces change on us, but we then choose how to respond for ourselves because we are discovering new meaning and purpose in the face of what's happened and is happening.

2) But second and finally, the prophecy of Isaiah and the gospel of Jesus call us to discover God and relate to God in a more profound way. Yes, we can interpret all that happens in the world with a controlling God in charge. If good things happen it's because God is happy or we've prayed well, believed well and lived well. If bad things happen, we have to figure out what in us or in those who are suffering made God angry.

Our second option is to give up on God altogether. What happens in our world beyond human control has no rhyme or reason to it. Sometimes we can trace causes and their effects, but too often this has nothing to do with whether a person is good or bad.

But what Jesus is teaching in the gospels and what the prophesy of Isaiah is pushing towards is the discovery that even though there is randomness and chance in the world and there is no controlling God in charge behind it all, praying to God and cultivating a

relationship with God can make all the difference in the world. Communing with God can feed us with new faith, hope and love, so that we find new ways to face things, live things, make choices and overcome obstacles. We find new ways through death to resurrection. We are changed as people by what happens to us and those around us. We can become people who discover fulfillment and meaning where we didn't find it before, new purpose to be, a deeper calling, new gifts and talents, new courage and compassion, the kind of faith that can wait upon the Lord with more steadfast hope....

So, what does this look like for people like Gordon in our opening story, for people like him and people like us who can't change many things in our lives? Healing and salvation may be about acceptance. Rather than fight certain things and be bitter about them, we come to deeper places of surrender and peace. Eternity belongs to God even if life in this world is not in our control. God will not let us go even if there's no miraculous intervention. Sometimes we just need to surrender to that, and cultivate a faith and hope in the midst of that....

For those who are left behind it may be about becoming more appreciative about the gift of life and the treasure we've enjoyed as long as we've enjoyed it.

It may be that we treasure the relationships in our lives more and reach out to people more. It may be that we become more attentive listeners to others, less judgemental and more compassionate and understanding. God is not finished with us until we take our last breath. There is always something we can do as followers of Christ the healer for others. There is always a way we can be opened so that we experience healing and salvation in who we are becoming as human beings. God will not change things on the outside. That's not what God's relationship with the world is about. But in prayerful communion with God, we can change ourselves so that life becomes a new blessing every time... In prayerful communion with God, healing energy can flow into us and healing energy can flow to others through our prayers and our care... new faith, new hope, and new love in our hearts has healing power, however that healing is manifested....

We can give up on life, give up on God, get bitter and angry, or just disappear into our own little world... Or, we can wait upon the Lord until we discover new strength to mount up with new wings like eagles... What will you do? How will you live your life as it is today and may be tomorrow? What opportunities to serve are all around you awaiting your response?

Let us pray: Heal us, O God.... Save us.... Heal us and save us from our need to be in control and to have things exactly as we want them.... Heal us and save us so that we open ourselves to ever new ways of living and loving to meet the changes in our lives.... Amen.