

WHEN THE FEVER LEFT

Mark 1:29-39

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 4, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

I.

Whenever we hear a Biblical story about healing, we likely react in one of several ways.

Our eyes may immediately be drawn to our own experience.

Though I played sports through high school, I never suffered a serious injury – no broken bones, dislocated shoulders, concussions. I have had a few minor surgeries along the way, but I have never been or felt seriously ill, though a few years ago I had a two-night stay in a hospital over what was diagnosed at the time as a minor stroke but whose remnants in my brain had three months later disappeared, leaving doctors to wonder whether anything in fact had happened. While I am grateful to be alive, gratitude and anticipation are feelings I have most mornings, most days. Unlike Peter's mother-in-law, I don't have a sense that I have been healed, but rather a sense I have always had that God is watching, always.

When we hear a Biblical story of healing, we may think of people who have experienced some kind of healing:

- People we know who have survived cancer, some more than once
- People who no longer take a drink, ingest a drug, rely on opioids
- People who have learned to walk and talk after being told by doctors they would not likely do either.

When I visit in hospitals I pray that God will use the gifts of medicine and technology, the skill of doctors and nurses, for the best health and healing of the person for whom I am praying. And I believe that God often uses these gifts, along with the faith and determination of the patient, to provide us with extended health. But I also know that even those of us who survive illness or accident will eventually die, as Peter's mother-in-law did, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, but of whom, "doubtless died a second death, the time, the

place, and the circumstances of which are all unknown.”¹ In the Book of Second Kings, one of Judah’s kings named Hezekiah, is told he has a terminal illness, turns his face to the wall, prays for an extension, is granted one by God through Isaiah, and serves for fifteen more years as one of the more successful kings in a period of Israel’s history in which success was rare. Yet Hezekiah too eventually dies.²

Whenever we read a Biblical story of healing, we may wonder about – and even be angry over – those near to use who have not been healed.

When James and John, the third and fourth disciples Jesus calls, see Peter’s mother-in-law healed before their very eyes, I wonder if their minds dwell on their own mother, who, unlike their father, is never mentioned in scripture? Had she been snatched from them when they were boys, their father a young man, before they had begun their family fishing business, the business James and John would leave in their father’s hands in order to follow Jesus?³

An aide at a doctor’s office I visited this week told me that sixteen years ago, when he was twelve, his mother was waiting for a bus on Pennsylvania Avenue and struck by a car. He learned of her death when he arrived home from school that day. He attends a Presbyterian Church some, but only some, and I wonder if he is beset by a lingering wonder or anger as to why she died unhealed. Did James and John have to overcome anger about the loss of their mother before they could follow Jesus?

When we hear Biblical stories of healing, we may also quietly turn away, stare at our shoes, change the subject to the weather or Super Bowl.

We may act out of that part of our mind that doubts what have traditionally been called “miracles,” out of our critical thinking that leads us to receive such stories as the stuff of legend but not fact, out of our perception of human progress that leads us to view such stories as arising from a time more primitive than ours. If we remain in the church and listen to sermons about such stories, we keep our eyes and ears open for some deeper moral message the story may convey beyond the *elements* of the story we have trouble accepting.

In my ministry, I have seen people survive illness and accidents they were not expected to survive, and I have a sense of God’s presence in such survivals, through I have never said a prayer and opened my eyes to someone taking up their bed and walking, opening their eyes and seeing, opening their ears and hearing. I trust others who claim such healings; I have simply never witnessed one.

II.

In the many healings in which Jesus is involved, the method he uses varies, and the science of it is both hard to determine and seemingly of little interest to the gospel writers who narrate the events.

- In our story, Jesus takes Peter’s mother in law by the hand, lifts her up, and the fever leaves her.
- Later in Mark, he commands demons be cast out of the Gerasene demoniac and the demons obey him.⁴
- To some Jesus simply says: “Go in peace, your faith has made you well,” and they do,⁵ seemingly well.

¹ John D. Davis, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1929), 445.

² I Kings 20:1-21.

³ Mark 1:19-20.

⁴ Mark 1:29-31.

⁵ Mark 5:34 is an example of this.

- To a paralyzed man lowered to Jesus' feet through an opening cut in the roof, Jesus bestows healing, seemingly in response to the faith of four friends who bring the man to Jesus.⁶
- One woman simply touches his cloak in a crowd and is healed, and he can tell that healing power has left him.⁷
- For a man born blind, Jesus touches his eyes with saliva, and after two attempts, the man sees clearly.⁸

As Mark summarizes in our passage, Jesus "cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons," without giving much indication concerning how Jesus accomplished such feats other than the power of God that inhered within him.

III.

When I chose to preach on this passage today, what attracted me was one simple sentence at the outset of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law: *Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

We don't know anything about Peter's mother-in-law other than that she is Jewish (as Peter is), and because of her fever is not able to welcome and host her guests in the manner in which she would normally be inclined to do. Her healing allows her to carry out such service, and thus represents for her a return to normalcy which she claims and embraces.

Shortly before Christmas, David Lehman published a narrative poem in *The New Yorker* which describes something of a return to normalcy after healing. I read the poem in part:

It's June 15, 2017, a Thursday,
 fortieth anniversary of the infamous day
 the Mets traded Tom Seaver to Cincinnati
 and they're still losing
 I mean we are
 7 to 1 to the Washington Nationals
 a team that didn't exist in 1977
 the summer of a little tour in France...
 in a yellow Renault douze

the light a lovely gray
 the rain a violin
 concerto...
 and I had books to read...
 I went upstairs stood on the terrace ate some cherries
 admired the outline of trees in the dark
 and Rosemary Clooney
 sang "It Could Happen to You"
 and I was a healthy human being, not a sick man
 for the first summer in three years.⁹

⁶ Mark 2:1-12, especially verse 5.

⁷ Mark 5:25-34.

⁸ Mark 8:22-26.

⁹ David Lehman, "It Could Happen To You," *The New Yorker* 12/4/17.

When we experience healing, normalcy never felt better. It happened to Peter's mother-in-law. It could happen to us.

IV.

But for Peter's mother-in-law, the return to normalcy is not simply a return to business as usual, as welcome and beautiful as such is when we have been made well. For her, the restoration to health also leads to service. When "the fever left her," Mark says, "she began to serve them."

- The verb translated "serve" here is the Greek verb *diakonei*.
- It is the same verb Mark uses to describe the support angels provide Jesus when he is in the wilderness with wild beasts, tempted by Satan, for forty days.¹⁰
- It is a verb that describes a person being an agent of God's presence and strength during a time of need, the verb from which we Presbyterians and other Christian traditions derive the name and office of "deacon." *Diakonei, diakonei, diakonei*.

When the fever leaves Peter's mother-in-law, through the lift of Christ's hand, she becomes an agent of presence and strength. Her life has not only been rescued, her health restored, but she has been extended to serve even more.

V.

When I read this story, I try, as I always do, to place myself in the text, by identifying with one of the characters.

- Am I Peter, bringing new-found disciples to the home of my wife's mother?
- Am I Jesus, beginning the ministry for which I have been baptized but recently?
- Am I the host and homeowner, being healed?
- Or am I a bystander, a reader, a witness to this unfolding drama?

While I have experienced some spiritual and psychological healing over the years of my life, I am most drawn to experience this text as an observer, watching healing that occurs in people close to me.

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There is addiction on my mother's side of the family, which skipped her generation but didn't skip mine, as my brother suffered with it and from it during the halcyon drug days of the 1970s. As he tells it, when a girlfriend broke up with him in college and later he walked away from a white Pinto he had driven into a tree in the middle of the night, he simply stopped drinking, stopped taking drugs, on his own, without treatment, without AA, but stop I know he did.

The disease he kept at bay didn't skip his own family, however, as his second child, a son, is an addict who married an addict, but who, like Peter's mother-in-law, managed to break free from his addiction, secure both

¹⁰ Mark 1:13.

custody and safety for his daughters, keep himself and them away from the opioids that have rendered their mother virtually a missing person.

Through all this my brother, his father, has been a wise, strong, and helpful support. *Diakonei. Diakonei. Diakonei.*

Even though I have seen this but from a distance, it is a privilege to witness, as it is a privilege to watch Peter's mother-in-law *serve* once her fever is lifted. My brother does not claim to be a religious person, but the fever of addiction that left him years ago led him to serve others, in his family, perhaps outside his family, beset by the same fever.

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It is not just illness and addiction, but also poverty, grief, depression, divorce, unemployment, and loneliness from which, when we have passed through, we can to serve others similarly beset. I hope you are not currently beset by fever or illness of any kind, but most of us are, at some time or another.

- If you have been so beset, I hope the fever that has been lifted from you, as it was lifted from Peter's mother-in-law.
- If you are currently beset, I hope it lifts soon.
- Most of all, I hope, I trust, and I imagine, that when it has been lifted, you, like her, will arise and serve, resuming a service you had long known, but likely in a different way, or entering a whole new realm service. It is giving back. It is giving thanks. It is stewardship of what God has given us.

“Then the fever left her, and she began to serve...”

“It could happen to you.”

Amen.