

Healing as the Invasion of God's Reign: Setting Captives Free

Mark 1:21-28

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My sisters, my brothers,

Once upon a time there was a church office whose copier absolutely refused to work right. Didn't matter what anyone did, it wouldn't work. It was as if the darned thing was possessed! Well, the smart-aleck minister came up, laid his hands upon that rebellious machine, and cried out, "Heyalll-ah!" It was a light moment, poking gentle fun at some of the more outlandish faith-healers. But, really, many of us know someone who is *desperate* for a healing touch from our Creator. Some of us here today, truth be told, have indeed experienced God's healing in some way. And maybe others sort of secretly wish we could have been in that room long ago, lining up to meet Jesus the healer. Yeah, make fun of it if you will, but there still remains a deep human longing for healing. The heart whispers, "Heal us, O God."

Well, too many times folks flat get it wrong. Hear the cacophony of voices that swirl around the miracle of healing. "It won't work," some say. You just cannot break the rules of nature, the laws of physics. Modern science leaves no room for miracles. Thomas Jefferson, whose brilliant mind kept up with the latest in science, politics, philosophy, mathematics, actually snipped out all miracle stories of his New Testament. He produced his own cut-and-paste story of Jesus.¹ Anything that conflicted with the laws of physics simply was not possible. Therefore, no miracles, no healing. Q.E.D. Others take a gentler tone: "Well, I really don't want to set you up for a fall. I'll go through the motions if it will help you feel better, but please don't expect much." Not as stern as Jefferson, but playing the same game. Others avoid the whole issue like a hot rock: "Oh, no. No way am I touching this one! Please find somebody else. Have a nice day."

On the other hand, there are those who plunge in with both feet: "Of *course* God can heal! God can, God *must*! Anytime, anywhere. Just ask, and results are guaranteed. Says so right here in the Book." Folks like this bank on an on-demand magic, a God who jumps to it whenever we pull God's string. The Bible promises it, I demand it, that settles it. And if the healing doesn't "work"? Takes too long? Incomplete? Or total silence? Oh, that's easy: you didn't have enough faith! It's all *your* fault. Pass the trowel so we can spread on the guilt. This move puts more faith in the healing than the Healer.

And, of course, there are plenty of faith-healers who will seduce the good folks desperate for healing, raking in the bucks and giving them a good show. Just send in your cash, and you can have a healing cloth autographed by Jesus. Okay, if I sound a bit harsh right now, let me offer a challenge. Yes, divine healing is possible. Certainly. And if any faith-healer truly believes that he or she has been given the gift of divine healing, fine. Wonderful. Go where it will do some good: go to Walter Reed Army Hospital and get to work on some damaged young men and women who *really* need healing. And do it for free. Otherwise please get off the stage. Put up or shut up.

And if the guaranteed results don't come off as promised, well, somebody messed up: the poor sap seeking healing, the fraud promising the healing, or – and here's the real danger – God just let us down. God really *doesn't* care. Do you see the problem? If you are counting on healing as a *proof* of God's existence, a demonstration that God really does care, you've misplaced your faith. As Jesus himself said, God is just not going to play that game (Luke 11:16, 29-32). Yup, too many times we just get it wrong. We don't get what healing is really about.

Well, then, let's take another look at today's story. Let's listen for what Mark might want us to hear. Jesus is in Capernaum, his hometown, in the synagogue, the place of learning and prayer on the sabbath, the day of rest, the day of worship. Please notice what storyteller Mark is setting up for us here. Synagogue: the *place* focused on God. Sabbath: the *time* focused on God. The place and time ripe for an invasion of divine holiness, transcendent cleansing, the very presence of God barging into this world. Get ready. And what is Jesus doing in the synagogue on that sabbath? Teaching. What is he teaching? Alas, Mark doesn't tell. But – aha! – he taught with authority! Ah, yes, *that's* our Jesus! Authority. Yessir! Oh, and authority better than the scribes. Yes, it just keeps getting better and better. Good stuff! Teaching, and with authority. Maybe even teaching those scribes with their framed diplomas on the wall. That'll show 'em. Good ol' Jesus.

But what is this? A man suddenly appears, screaming at Jesus: "What are you doing with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" "Us?" What, is he crazy? But he screams even louder: "I know who you are: you are the Holy One of God!" Shocked silence. Now, some teachers might nod their heads knowingly. "Oh, yeah, my students might not be brave enough to shout it out, but they're *thinking* it...." But you just don't do that in the *synagogue*. You don't do that in *church*. Get up, shout at the teacher? No way. And what does teacher-of-the-day Jesus do? Call in the principal to expel this troublemaker? No – he shouts back (now, I'm not recommending this as a pedagogical practice, mind you), he shouts back: "Shut up!" (Okay, fine, I'm with you so far, good response.) "and come out of him!" And – boom! – the poor fellow screams, convulses, and collapses. Total silence. Then wild applause. "Wow! Did you see that? He can teach, he can yank unclean spirits out of folks – what authority this guy has!" What a Super Bowl moment! Let's see that one on instant replay. But slow down. Mark is looking us straight in the eye, daring us. *Challenging* us: what will you do about this? I gave you all the clues. Now put it together.

What we have in today's story is Mark's show-and-tell about Jesus. Here is what Jesus was all about. In Mark's vision, Jesus was walking, talking, power-of-God roaming this earth. He was the living embodiment of God's will, the raging energies of the kingdom of God invading the sphere of Planet Earth. And this was his coming-out party. In the *holy space* of the synagogue, during the *holy time* of the sabbath, he was *holiness itself* come into town to clean up the place. In this story, Mark is saying, "Look out, folks, the invasion of God has started." Heck, the unclean spirits knew: "Have you come to destroy us?" You bet! That's *exactly* what Jesus was here to do. Jesus came to declare war on any power that tries to shut down any beloved child of God. Any illness, any infirmity, any sickness of mind, body, or spirit. "Shut up, and come out of her!" That's what Mark's vision of divine healing is: an assault on whatever holds you in bondage – mind, body, or spirit.

Jesus came to set the captives free. He came to liberate, to bring folks back to themselves, to emancipate from the prisons of illness, to *re-integrate* what was *dis-integrated*, to *re-orient* all who were *dis-oriented*. Why? Any healing that happens is not just nicey-nice, God-feels-sorry for you poor slobs. No – every healing is a *revelation* – if we have the smarts to catch it. Any healing says, “*This* is God’s intention for you: not to trudge through this world, but to *thrive!*” That’s why Mark’s story links healing-by-Jesus with teaching-by-Jesus: *know* God’s intention, and *live* God’s intention for you. God wills you to flourish! To thrive, whatever your situation. *Nothing* need defeat you. That’s what Jesus was all about, says Mark. To free you from whatever is holding you down. The very power of God setting you free.

And if we stop there, we’ve missed the point. Dig deeper, says Mark. If all we do is applaud, like the crowd, we’re just enjoying the show and no more. If we are healed and walk away *unchanged*, we’ve just wasted Jesus’ time. Look, in Mark’s world, healers were a dime a dozen. Everybody believed in healing. Physical cure is nice, sure, we want it, yes – but Mark is luring us to search for more. What happens to that noisy guy that was healed? Who knows? He just drops out of the story. No, Mark is aiming for bigger things.

Dig down deep enough, and *every* illness, *every* infirmity, threatens the meaningfulness of life. Every disability raises a host of disturbing questions: what good am I anymore? What future do I have? Society thinks I’m worthless, and sometimes I wonder myself.... People treat me like I’m unclean, like I’m contagious, like I’m no longer a real person. Every amputee asks, in the silence of the heart, “Will you still love me, mutilated as I am?” Every chronic illness poses the agonizing question, “Am I still a fully human person?” These are “unclean-spirit” questions that try to lock us up into a tight little jail cell, to imprison our souls, to cut off our future, to squash us flat. And every band-aid, soul-less, wowee-look-at-that “healing” simply treats people as *things*. The healer is just an auto-mechanic replacing a malfunctioning part. Superficial “healing” turns the pitied recipient of our momentary attention into a mere machine. The act of healing becomes a mere transaction. And success just wows the crowd. Jesus came for *more*. He came to *give* us more.

Physical healing is just one part of a larger process. And maybe it isn’t even the most important part, if you can forgive a fairly healthy, fairly able-bodied white male that claim. When I pondered what healing is all about, I thought of Debbie, who now teaches in a seminary. When I knew her at Vanderbilt, she was in her twenties, walking with a cane. I remember seeing her in the hallway once, having a walking-cane sword fight with a professor who also walked with a cane. She told me once, “We are all temporarily abled.” And I thought of the apostle Paul, who beat on God’s door *three times*, asking for God to whisk away his “thorn in the flesh,” whatever that was. And each time, God came back, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12: 8-9). “My grace is sufficient” – what the heck does that mean, God? Thanks a lot. I thought of Jesus himself: one day I was just bowled over when it struck me – wait just a minute! He *kept* the nail-cuts and spear-slash in his *resurrected* body. No, there’s something more profound going on here. Maybe, maybe we focus too exclusively on what we are healed *from* and lose track of what we are healed *toward*. Maybe part of true healing is *not* forgetting what it was like before, for the sake of somebody else. Maybe true healing doesn’t always involve *cure* of the ailment, not every time.² Maybe part of healing means *remembering* your wounds, remembering

your infirmities. Maybe part of healing means realizing that God's presence can use those very wounds, those exact infirmities. God can use everything we are, just *as* we are. "My grace is sufficient." But that's just words.

Whoa! Words? What did Jesus use in his teaching? Words! But get this: what did he use to evict the unclean spirit? Words! Words with authority, words of power: "shut up! Come out of him!" Words which invoked the presence of God in that man, kicking out the unclean spirit that held him trapped, chained down, locked up. Maybe the truth is this: whether you are "cured" or not, *you have to decide what to do next*. Words can open up a new future for you. "I'm only a cripple." "Shut up! Come out of him!" "I'm worthless like this." "Shut up! Come out of her!" "Cured" or not, am I any good? God says, yes, absolutely! "Cured" or not, can I still make a difference? God says, "Yes! Oh, yes, just you wait and see!" Words. Words! "Cured" or not, *words* can set us free.

Sooner or later, all of us come to a "T" in the road. You can't go straight ahead. You've got to turn either right or left. Turn one way, and you give up on God. God broke God's own promise. Oh, you might continue to go to church, even become a leader. But deep down, you are convinced that God does not exist. God does not heal. God really doesn't care. Churches are sprinkled with steady tithers who have given up on God. They are just going through the motions. Their tiny jail cell is locked up tight.

Or . . . you can turn the other direction. You can look *through* the heal-*ing* to the Heal-*er*. "My grace is sufficient"? Well . . . okay. If you say so. Do I trust You enough to take You at Your word? I'll try. I'm working on it. Can Jesus heal with a word? Oh, God, I hope so. Can I live with *God* deciding *how* to heal me? Or when? If you help me, God, maybe I can. Sign me up.

Healed with a word. Set free from all that is trying to hold us down, hold us back. But be assured, *God* will hold us up. With a word, Jesus will heal all who are trapped in bondage.

But he will do it *his* way. And us? We stand at that "T" in the road. Which way to turn? Which way?

Notes

1 Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth: Extracted Textually from the Gospels, Together with a Comparison of His Doctrines with Those of Others* (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1902).

2 I am indebted for this distinction to Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 51-53, and *passim*.