

Isaiah 40: 21-31
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1: 29-39

Gathering at the Door
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There are times when beautiful poetry, or beautiful prose, really does lift us up. The 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah begins with a loud proclamation: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” We have heard this read and sung so many times when we need to hear a word of hope. And then, later in the chapter, themes of comfort for the people continue, and the transience of human powers is compared with the enduring nature of God in some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible. And there are promises too, echoes of old stories: God “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless... they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” The people hear the echo of the Exodus journey, when God spoke: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” (Exodus 19:4) These were uplifting songs for tired, demoralized, and traumatized people, and we need to hear them from time to time. (By the way, I know that some of you hear another echo today when you hear the word “Eagles”...but that’s for later, not until 6 pm).

Then there’s this week’s lectionary reading from the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus goes to Simon Peter’s house, learns that Simon’s mother-in-law is sick, and heals her instantly. But it doesn’t end there. Mark goes on to report that as word spreads about the miraculous healing, the “whole city” gathers outside Simon’s door, and Jesus “cures many who are sick with various diseases, and casts out many demons.” And then, following a night of prayer, he travels throughout Galilee, “proclaiming the message” (the one about the kingdom of God being very near) and casting out more demons. Many people find this a hopeful, uplifting reading: even the part about Simon’s mother-in-law instantly becoming the perfect hostess may make us smile.

But, then, I think, if you have had a week of bad news, or are facing the death of a loved one for whom there is no cure, or if the process of aging for you means anything but a renewal of strength, some of these healing stories sound, not only impossible, but cruel. Or, to put a better spin on it, inaccessible. If you are in a place when you suffer, or mourn, or await the slow march of cancer across another human landscape, what do you do with Simon’s sprightly mother-in-law? Things seemed to have changed drastically since Jesus was in Capernaum, proclaiming the Kingdom of God with miraculous healings. What does God’s intervention look like now? What does a miracle look like?

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote “The problem with miracles is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by.”

Speaking of miraculous healings, recently I listened to a podcast of Radiolab, which describes itself as a show about curiosity, “where sound illuminates ideas, and the boundaries blur between science, philosophy, and human experience.” This episode was called “*Match Made in Marrow*,” and told the story of a bone marrow donor and a bone marrow recipient. A young

woman named Jennell, on a whim, more or less – an altruistic whim - signed up to be a donor at a concert, got the cheek swab and went into a database or registry. Then, after a while, she was called in for more tests. Then, a month later, she got another call and this one said: “Well, we’ve done tests and you are the ideal person in this 8 million person registry to donate for this *one* patient.” Long story short, she donates, and a very ill young man receives her stem cells, and is cured of cancer. It’s very moving. And a little more than a year later, they meet and become friends. But what makes this story more interesting is their interpretations of what happened. The donor, Jennell, felt wonderful in being able to save a life, and eventually, when she met the recipient, Jim, once he was well, it deepened that sense of purpose and fulfillment and connection. She happens to be an atheist. But the recipient, Jim, was a committed Christian, and he felt that so many aspects of the story were “signs” from God: the gift of blood as a saving gift, the three days between the notification about the match and his “second birth” (that’s how the nurses actually described it) when he got the transplant. That fact that Jennell, when they met, showed him the place on her arm where she had made the gift – an echo of the resurrection appearance of Jesus. Each of them created a narrative about healing, and one of the main points they shared was about how unlikely it was, how miraculous: apparently one in 8 million. No matter how you tell it, it’s a great story.

But the producer of Radiolab went to the Be A Match website, that Jennell had used, and found this in formation: “A patient’s likelihood of finding a matching donor on Be The Match registry is estimated to be in the range between 66 and 97 percent.” The chances that you’ll find a 10 to 10 match, in the way that Jim and Jennell did, with 10 genetic matches, is around 50 percent. People who understand statistics also understand that both things can be true at the same time – the perfect match feeling like a unique, life-changing – or indeed life-saving – moment, and yet the big picture says that it is quite likely to happen.

This story tells me that we need, almost more than anything else, to create narratives that explain our joy and our pain. Interestingly, neither Jim nor Jennell had a problem with the fact that their explanatory narratives didn’t match. Jennell said, “I think the idea of humility and, as Jim might even say, grace, is absolutely essential, no matter your tenets of belief.” Now there is a moment of grace indeed: a graceful moment of non-judgmental spiritual connection between an atheist and evangelical. Looks like we’ll all have to create a new narrative for that one.

According to Mark’s narrative, it seems like everyone in sight who is sick or oppressed by demons comes to Jesus and he heals them. It’s instantaneous and complete. The lame walk, the deaf hear, and those who are enchained by evil forces are suddenly free. The Easter message of the Christian church says that the spirit of the risen Christ continues to be present with us today. But, in case you haven’t noticed, the lame are still limping, cancer still kills, the deaf still need to sign, and those who are caged by their own demons still suffer. So, what narrative will we create? Are the stories untrue, or indeed, unnecessary, or is the Spirit of the risen Christ present, but in a way that is quite different from the body of the living Christ in Capernaum? As my friend Rachel said, “I know God is working. I’d just like a conversation about a few of his methods.”

Perhaps our narrative will have to start with the power of being in a community that listens seriously to the old stories. This would be a community that sticks together in the face of weakness, fragility, and brokenness. It is a community of humility and grace. We will honor the power of Spirit-led human word and touch, when we pray for and embrace one another. When our lame ones limp, the Spirit that lifts on eagles wings will slow our gait to walk together. When our deaf sign, we will strive to sign right back, listening to their hands. When those who are suffering from

addictions or mental illness need a place to gather and live in hope, we will provide it. And when that demon, Cancer, comes, we will be gathered together, strong in the Spirit, to say, “No, you will not have the last word here!”

What does God’s intervention look like? What does a miracle look like?

We are all gathering, so to speak, at the door in Capernaum, looking for something: to be lifted up, to be healed, for a touch that restores our purpose and sense of self-worth, for a “cure” for the most immediate evil of the day. We are sad, we are angry, we are needy. We press against the door. We want to shake our fists at God, and say, “What the ____ is going on?!!” We are the people Jesus welcomed, tired as he was, and the people Jesus did his best for. We have been touched by that humility and grace.

We gather at the door, looking for a saving narrative, a saving story. In the same way, we’ll gather today at a table. Before we share communion there, we hear and tell a story that gives meaning to our actions. We remember our differences and approach the table with humility and grace. Have you not known? Have you not heard? God is there before us, waiting, with inexhaustible love. Amen.