

**Healing Grace**  
**The Reverend Dr. Sandy Selby**  
**February 7, 2021**  
**Epiphany 5(B) - Mark 1:29-39**

The whole of Scripture speaks to two questions: How is God present and active in the world, and what does that mean for us, as the people of God? Those two questions in turn raise a third: How are we to respond to God's active presence among us, individually and collectively?

Today's lesson from Isaiah speaks of the way God is present and active in the world through God's cosmic, transcendent power and grandeur:

“To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.  
Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?  
He who 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” (Is 40:25-26)

The gospel lessons during this season of Epiphany reveal how that transcendent power comes among us and is revealed to us, immanently and intimately, in Jesus Christ. Today's story from Mark is familiar because it appears in the lectionary every three years. This time around, the story of the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law has particular resonance. After nearly a year of dealing firsthand with the impact of COVID-19, we long for the day we can be freed from its bondage. How we long for healing from the disease itself, from the systemic racial disparities it has revealed, and from the pandemic's impact on the livelihood of so many! And how we long for healing from the violence, division, and rancor that have infected our nation and, indeed, much of the world.

Today, every one of us is in need of healing—in body, mind, and spirit. Together, we will pray for healing, in a ceremony of healing and light during our worship this morning.

We don't know whether Jesus ever encountered a pandemic. We do know that life expectancy in those days was around thirty-five years. Illness was rampant, and deadly. And life under the rule of the Romans and the Temple authorities was both violent and oppressive, with massive income inequality, and no safety net.

Enter Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus began his ministry with a sense of urgency; Mark uses the word “immediately” four times in the first chapter of his gospel! Clearly, amidst the chaos and suffering of first-century Israel under Roman rule, Jesus has a sense of urgency to usher in the Reign of God that is grounded in God's power and characterized by love, peace, justice, and mercy. His ministry of proclamation and healing—a word whose root also means “wellness,” or “wholeness”—sought to help those he encountered to become the people God created them to be: restored to wholeness, welcomed into the community, and dedicated to the common good. Jesus healed them, setting them free from the bondage of all that gets in the way

of the abundant life that is God's will for all creation. This was a matter of life or death, brokenness or wholeness, and Jesus had a profound sense of urgency to make that happen.

In today's lesson from Mark's gospel, after leaving the synagogue, Jesus, along with James and John, enters the house of Simon Peter and Andrew. Learning that Peter's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever, Jesus goes to her room, takes her hand, and lifts her up. Immediately, the fever leaves her.

Her response? Mark says, "she began to serve them." What??!! She gets up from her death bed and *serves* them? When we look at the story through a 21st-century lens, we may want to say, "C'mon Peter! You've got arms and legs. Get up from the recliner, go out in the kitchen and make some sandwiches! Give your mother-in-law a break!"

But we can look at this story differently if we understand that the healing this woman received from Jesus not only cured her of her disease, but also brought her wholeness, restoring her to community and to her vocation of service. "She began to serve them." The Greek word for serve is "*diakoneo*"—the root word for "deacon," one who serves. Jesus freed her *from* her illness, and he freed her *for* service. We see this word *diakoneo* again in the 10th chapter of Mark's gospel, when Jesus says to his disciples, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43b).

We see it again in the 15th chapter, where we learn that a group of women watched the crucifixion of Jesus "from a distance," while Peter and the other men were nowhere to be seen. Some of the women are named—Mary and Mary Magdalene, among others. But many remain nameless. Mark tells us that these women provided for Jesus during his ministry, "serving" him—*diakoneo*—along the way, supporting him in his work while doing the ministry to which they were called. Perhaps, Peter's mother-in-law was one of these women. Having been healed by Jesus, she was freed from her illness for service to Jesus and, in the process, joined him in his mission.

Back to today's lesson from Mark's 1st chapter: after Peter's mother-in-law was healed, word got out, and the entire village of Capernaum came to her house at sunset, asking Jesus to heal them of their disease or their demons, and many were cured. By God's healing power, they found freedom *from* disease and freedom *for* wholeness, freedom to be the people God created them to be in God's reign of peace, justice, mercy, and love.

Two thousand years later, we ask the same questions we raised in looking at Mark's gospel account of the healing work of Jesus: How is God present and active in the world, and what does that mean for us, as the people of God? Those two questions raise a third: How are we to respond to God's active presence among us?

In considering these central questions of the faith, I'll speak from my own experience. Before I followed the call to ordained ministry, I worked for eighteen years for BFGoodrich. Twenty-five years ago I traveled to Toulouse, France to visit one of our largest customers, Airbus, at their headquarters. Toulouse is only a couple of hours from Lourdes, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to the peasant girl Bernadette in a grotto by a river, in 1858. Each year, millions of visitors make the pilgrimage to this town in the Pyrenees in order to be healed by the waters that flow from a spring there. I decided to arrive a day early in Toulouse, rent a car, and spend the day driving through the Pyrenees and visiting Lourdes.

If you've been there, you know the streets are lined with gift shops filled with souvenirs and kitsch. It's a big business! As I approached the town, I vowed not to allow myself to be

cynical about the commercialization, but to be open to experience what draws so many to that place. As it was February, there weren't throngs of people, so I could walk quietly along the path approaching the grotto. Along the way, I watched pilgrims approach the large basilica to attend Mass. Some were walking along the concrete on their feet, others on their knees, others in wheelchairs.

Beyond the cathedral is a ramp that winds downhill toward the river and the grotto. As I walked down the ramp I felt an increasing sense of "fullness" around and within me, a fullness that remained as I entered the grotto where Bernadette saw Mary. Looking around me, I could see that the wall of the grotto was filled with canes that had been hung there because they were no longer needed, their owner having been cured. What went through my mind were the words in today's lesson from Isaiah: "God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but 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" (Is 40:29-31).

I don't know the *facts* about what the peasant girl Bernadette did or did not see in the grotto in 1858. I don't know the *facts* about whether those canes hanging on the wall really did belong to people who discarded them because they had been cured. Those facts aren't really important to me. What is important is the *truth*: people who go to Lourdes may not be *cured* of their disease or disability. Indeed, since 1858, there have been only 69 documented miracles or cures,<sup>1</sup> though thousands more have claimed to be cured. But whether or not they have been *cured*, I suspect that millions have been *healed* there, bathed in the fullness of God's presence, and made whole. I know I was.

My visit to Lourdes may well have been one of the things that nudged me out the door of BFGoodrich, five years later, and into the rooms of Akron General Medical Center, where I did my chaplaincy training, then worked as an on-call chaplain there and at Akron Children's Hospital for nearly twenty years. Early on in my training I visited a patient in the Oncology unit. I had known Grace for around 15 years, as we went to the same church. She was dying of cancer. As I sat with her, I wondered what I could do or say to be of comfort. As we talked, Grace could sense my struggle. "Sandy," she said, "I know everyone is worried about me. I know you want to do something to make it better. The truth of the matter is that I'm just fine. I'm at peace, and I'm not afraid to die. I know I will be with God. It's the rest of you that I worry about."

Grace had moved into acceptance, the last of the stages of dying that Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote about in her landmark book, *On Death and Dying*. Those stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, are often used to describe the stages of grief, as well. Grace had come to accept that she was going to die. She had not been *cured* of her cancer, but she had been *healed*, made whole in God.

As I think back on that sense of "fullness" I felt at the grotto in Lourdes twenty-five years ago, it is as if the millions of prayers that pilgrims have said in that place over the past 160 years remain there, in the fullness of sacred time and space that is "charged with the grandeur of God," to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins. I've experienced that "fullness," the near presence of God, at other times in my life—in a great English cathedral during a service of Evensong, in nature, in the waiting room of an ICU when my father was dying. I suspect each of you have experienced

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Michael Moran evaluates Lourdes miracle reports," BBC News, 2/25/14, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26334964>

that fullness, that near presence and healing grace of God at various moments of your life, too. The psalmist says, “God touches all in the heavens and on the earth; everything is full of sacred presence” (Ps 103:19, Benedictine Sisters of Erie Inclusive Language Setting). When we open ourselves to receive that presence, the depth and fullness of God’s love that is ever around and within us, we are healed, made whole in God.

How do we respond to God’s active, healing presence among us? First, we give thanks. Then, in our words and in our actions, we follow Jesus, the great healer. It’s the challenge of a lifetime, and the opportunity we have before us, each day.

Amen.