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## The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 4, 2023

### Jesus Appears to Heal and Help His People

Jesus not only speaks with authority as we heard last Sunday; he also acts with authority and comes to help us in time of need. He deals with the difficulties and disasters that come into our lives because of Satan and his forces. The readings for today reveal Jesus shouldering our weariness and weakness, our anxiety and stress, and our diseases and ignorance. We find comfort and contentment with the Savior who heals and helps his people.

#### Sermon Mark 1:29-39

**As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.**

**That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.**

**Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him,<sup>37</sup> and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.**

The almighty God, the Creator of all things, watched with a pained heart as his creation fell into a state of degradation, entropy, self-destruction, and disease. And so his heart prompts him to adopt the very clothes of his creation on a mission of renewal and renovation. This grand God does some grand things, but it's the smallest details that bring the compassion and care of Jesus to life. No crowds. No fanfare. Behind closed doors the God of the universe grabs the wrinkled hand of an old woman and heals her. So complete is his healing power that she instantly gets up and does what is the only reasonable thing when your Lord personally delivers healing to you—she serves her God in the capacity that she knows how in the ways that are right before her. A line starts to form at the intersection before the house. One after another, the desperate drag themselves into place. The demon-possessed can't help but congregate like a moth to the flame. No matter the affliction, the prayer throughout is, "*Us, too, Lord.*"

Once evening hits and the Sabbath is over, and it's as if the green light switches on—*here they come!* You can almost hear the cries from the front: "*I'm healed!*" "*I can see!*" as the Healer continues to beckon, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...*" No matter what affliction this world has brought them—whether weariness or weakness; anxiety or stress; addiction, depression, disease—His Name is above that! The Creator of the world has no trouble re-creating and renewing his beloved creatures before him. Such *care*. Such *power*. On this Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Jesus is revealed as the one who heals and helps his people.

**Can Jesus Heal Me?**

But then, I come up. I may not be at that Israeli intersection, but I come dragging myself through the dust in desperation, nonetheless. As I bow to my knees in prayer, I take my place in that pathetic yet determined line of people and join the chorus, *“Me, too, Lord! I’m weary—Grant me rest! I’m weak—Strengthen me to go on another day! I’m anxious—Make me still! I’m stressed—Calm my soul. I’m enslaved in addiction—Free me! I’m drowning in depression—Lift me up! I’m dying of disease—Heal me!”* “...How come whenever I join the line, my turn never comes? I thought he was perfectly caring and infinitely powerful, but it must be either one or the other or both that aren’t true otherwise I wouldn’t be gripping the floor with a list of unanswered prayers still before me.” We join with Israel in our first reading, *“My way must be hidden from the Lord; my cause must be disregarded by my God.” Why doesn’t he heal ME?*

There’re many *amazing* accounts of Jesus healing people in the gospels. Remember the man who had been lying by the pool of Bethesda for *38 years* hoping to be healed by the waters? After *38 years* out of nowhere Jesus walks in, heals him, and leaves. That’s *amazing!* But... there was still a crowd of desperate people packed like sardines between those colonnades by the pool—so, why didn’t Jesus heal them, too? Does he not care enough? Or is he not powerful enough?

There’s a small crowd of us here today each with entire lives that you could write volumes of books about. In a lot of those pages, if we grouped them together, would be testimonies of Jesus’ healing in our lives. *“He took that struggle away from me.” “He brought me through this trial.” “He healed me from this infirmity.”* But we’d also have a fine stack of papers describing the needs we still are waiting for to be met. Struggles that you try to forget so you can just be happy for a time; diseases and ailments and conditions that you try to medicate and numb, but when you feel them again and you remember them again, and you see them stacked up with everybody else’s issues that have yet to be healed, you may look up and cry, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Do you just not care enough? Or are you not powerful enough? Which is it!? Jesus, I demand an answer.”*

*The Healer understands more than you can imagine.*

When life in this world brings you to your knees and you are led to pray that kind of agonizing prayer, picture your knees sinking into the soil of the Garden of Gethsemane. You hear footsteps fading into the distance about a stone’s throw away. You can’t see him, but Luke 22 gives you a glimpse of something that wrenches your gut. Here Jesus is, hands clawing the dirt. His body is shaking uncontrollably. Anguish afflicts him so intensely it manifests as beaded-up blood dripping from his beard. He’s weary. He’s weak. He may be the sinless Son of God, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t experience the humanness of pain, fear, and anxiety—quite the contrary. The thought of the excruciating punishment he would soon bear drove him to his knees in desperate prayer much like the very ones he healed with but a word time and time again. *“Father if you are willing, take this cup from me—nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”*

We ask: *“Doesn’t Jesus care?”* Hear his cries as he takes each lashing with the singular thought of your face in his mind. *“I love you. This is for you.”* Kneel before his body on the cross and watch him refuse to numb his pain one bit with that sponge of wine vinegar because he must suffer hell on earth for you. *The Healer killed.* Take in the sight of Christ on his cross and ask again if he cares.

We ask: *“Isn’t Jesus powerful enough to do something?”* Yes. He’ll prove it in three days when he rises from death itself for the justification that brings healing to the entire world. *The Healer healed—but only after the cross.* Take in the sight of the empty grave and ask again if he’s powerful enough.

If he’s caring enough and powerful enough, then why this suffering? Why the cross? Why doesn’t God avoid such anguish? The capable Healer allows himself to suffer and die to heal a deeper, more permanent wound; but it’s by those wounds that we are healed. The One who had reversed the effects of sin in crowds of people allowed the sins of the world to strike himself down, becoming sin that we might become righteous.

You have a God who, when you cry out to him in the distress of your suffering, “*Healer! Why don’t you heal this, too!*” he is far from a god aloof in the clouds. He is a God who intimately knows pain and suffering, “*a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,*” who knows what it’s like to be withheld deliverance for a time—*he lived it!*

There’s this one small detail in the gospels with massive implications when Jesus raised **Lazarus**. It says, “*Because Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed two more days in the place that he was.*” *Because* he loved them, he waited, and let Lazarus die. And then he shows up and he weeps? *You* did this, Jesus! You waited! Why are you the one weeping!? And the people around him see this and say, “*Oh, how he loved him! Oh, how he cared! But couldn’t he have kept this man from dying?*” Yes. Yes, he could. But he needed to draw Mary and Martha close to this promise: “*I AM the resurrection and the life.*” *Because* he loved them—*because* he loves you—even though it breaks his heart, even though it is his strange, alien work, sometimes he waits so that he can bring his loved ones near to his proper work, his gospel promises. There is hidden blessing in the waiting. That, brothers and sisters, is the *theology of the cross*.

Lutheran theologian Johann **Gerhardt** captures the essence of the *theology of the cross* when he says:

*“[Sometimes God lets his loved ones] experience much and great anxiety, but then he helps them again. And all such things he does for this reason, that we should seek rest for our souls in him, not outwardly good circumstance. For in this life no good circumstance is permanent. Therefore, we should also not depend on it with our heart, nor seek rest for our heart in it. Rather, the internal foundation of our soul should purely and only depend on God; then the rest of our heart will not be disturbed by our outward circumstances.”*

*Because* he loves you too much to let you have a *theology of glory*, where every need is met and you can set up your own earthly paradise without clinging to him, he allows the cross. The cross reminds us we’re not home yet. There was no crown for Christ without the cross, so there is no crown for the believer without their own crosses. This, dear Christian, is the One you follow close behind. Do not be surprised when your footsteps lead to similar pain and lack of healing like his did. It must be this way. Because he loves you—not because he doesn’t care, not because he’s not powerful enough—because he loves you, sometimes he waits.

These truths do not mean you have to manipulate your feelings before God. The lesson here is not to lead an emotionless life and, “*Suck it up, Christian! Jesus dealt with it so you can, too!*” No, you can and should long for healing. God already knows the frustrations of your heart, so you might as well be honest with him and tell him—he can take it! God wants you to come to him and *annoy* him with your requests like a little kid. He respects you when you wrestle with him through the night like **Jacob** and refuse to let him go until he blesses. And that might look like healing. But like **Job**, after you’ve gotten your honest, raw feelings out wrestling with the will of God, we ultimately must humbly recognize that our viewpoint is so narrow and small, and we must humbly trust that that our God (who is the type of God who lived human life, too, and suffered, died, and rose for us) is a God we can trust with an infinitely wider perspective than us. That’s what faith does—it doesn’t merely believe in the *existence* of God but *actively trusts* him when things get tough.

Your enemy, the devil, will be prowling around like a roaring lion during exactly those times of struggle, which is why **Peter** told us earlier, “*Be alert and of sober mind... Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*” And we resist in our struggles in this way: “*Humble yourselves... under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you... And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.*”

We’ve all been healed on a spiritual level, justified before God—we all have that as our testimony to the world. In addition to that, on a physical level, your testimony may be, “*Look what Jesus healed me of!*” And that is a powerful message! But what a sight it would be, dear Christian, for an *unhealed-one*... the one with the thorn still in their side... the one in waiting perhaps until the perfection of the new creation... with their wounds still

bleeding and their scars still showing, to proclaim to others with wounds and scars the care and power of our God. *That* is a high and noble calling. What a sight you will be! Amen.

May He who does not grow tired or weary renew your strength and raise you up at the proper time. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

*This sermon was preached by Vicar Micah Otto.*