

We're getting to the end of hearing from the prophecy of Ezekiel. I realized, looking back on the last 5 Sundays, that I've chosen passages from the prophet that are generally upbeat and hopeful. There aren't that many of them in Ezekiel's 47-chapter long book. And of course, next week we need to end on a hopeful note...as does the Book of Ezekiel.

So, this week I felt that we needed to hear one of his many chapters of condemnation and denunciation. Ezekiel uses many metaphors to express God's disapproval both of Israel and the countries that surround Israel. Since Ezekiel repeats himself many times over, this is not the only passage which uses the sheep and shepherd metaphor or that criticizes the leaders of the people of Israel.

In today's reading Ezekiel, remember that he is the direct mouthpiece of God, warns that corrupt and lazy leaders of the people produce a kind of chaos in which hungry, injured and scared sheep scatter, and feel they must fend for themselves individually instead of remembering that there is safety in numbers.

God says that if the human leaders are not up to the task of gathering and leading the sheep, then God will do the job. No wonder the psalmist wrote;

I will exalt you O LORD because YOU have lifted me up and have not let my enemies triumph over me. We may think of the enemies not only as people who may have us in their sights, but also of the personal devils and temptations which seek to bring us down.

This is a psalm to assure us that **we** are just human, but with God all things are possible. Many of us who have been to hell and back through illness, addiction, disaster, or deep personal loss can really identify with this psalm, and do believe that God has brought us up from the dead and has restored our lives as we were going down to the grave.

For those of us still in the middle of a tragedy, a grief or great distress, this psalm gives the hope that weeping may spend a night but joy will come in the morning. And where there is life and breath in you and me, there is hope. Morning **will** come.

The prophets felt God's presence, the writers of psalms knew of God's work in the world, but it is our people in today's Gospel reading who see God in Jesus Christ; God the healer, God the compassionate One, God of infinite power to save us.

Our passage from Mark starts with Jairus, who is a leader in the Jewish religious community. He comes to Jesus to say that his daughter is dying and asks for help. He risks becoming an outsider by his people for seeking the help of Jesus; that One who is known both as the healer AND rabble rouser. Jesus is well known and everywhere he goes now he is surrounded by crowds.

And then we have the interruption, the story of the woman in the crowd. Mark uses a doughnut construction to build suspense in the telling of the story of Jairus and his daughter by inserting the interruption. The suspense builds because we want Jesus to get quickly to the home where the little girl is dying. While the disciples try to protect Jesus from all the jostling people, trying to keep the crowds away, a story within a story unfolds.

These two stories have much in common; primarily they are stories of healing. I have said that Jairus risks being considered an outcast. Well, the woman in the crowd already is an outcast. Both of these characters take risks in coming to Jesus.

The woman in the crowd has been sick for many years. She spent all that she had on physicians, but to no avail. In fact she grew worse. Her hemorrhaging makes her ritually unclean, no one could go near her, and she was not allowed to take part in community or religious activities. She was very much alone. The crowd was huge, but she was determined to try to see Jesus so that she could be healed.

What we notice in both of these intertwined stories is that Jesus is compassionate to all. Jesus has love for the important man, Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, and for the untouchable woman who no one wants to be near. He makes no distinctions between peoples based on income, status, or religious traditions.

We see that Jesus is patient. He may be on his way to an important person's home. He may be on an imperative task, to bring back to life a little girl who is dying, but he still has time to stop, turn, and address the woman who boldly risked censure and rebuff because she was focused on the One who she knew would help her.

We humans think of healing in more practical and concrete terms. We have to triage patients who need help. We have only limited number of doctors in a hospital, and a limited amount of resources with which to help people. If a vaccine runs out, then it runs out and that is that. If too many people need dialysis then some aren't going to receive it, because there are only so many dialysis machines, and staff, and only so many hours in a day.

Jesus does not run out of healing power. For Jesus there is no fear that there is not enough time, or that his healing ability will be used up. We think in terms of human categories. God does not.

The woman risks humiliation and shunning by touching the cloak of Jesus, but she's willing to do it because she has reached a point of desperations. She thinks to herself, "If *stealing a healing* is the only way I can do this, I will."ⁱ

Little does the unnamed woman know, but we cannot steal anything from Jesus. Jesus freely gives God's love, and faith, and salvation. Grace is a free gift for anyone who asks God for it, and is willing to accept it. And Jesus brings this lone woman who appears to have none to support her, into the community of faith. He calls her daughter, and assures her that she has been made well.

Of course, Jesus has plenty of time and healing power to bring the daughter of Jairus back to life as well. Now we know that illness is a scourge to many of us. We lament that our sickness, and that of those we love cannot be healed in a moment as these two were made well. Those two who experienced the miracle of new life did die of something at some point later in time. None of us gets out of this life alive after all.

What we **do** take with us for the rest of our lives because of Jesus, is that we too are called sons and daughters in the community of Jesus. **We too** find healing in our faith in God's ability to heal. We too have had our wailing turned to dancing and will put off our sack-cloth and be clothed with joy. If you have not yet experienced this in your life, pray to God and ask to just touch the cloak of Jesus. God will be right there for you and me.

ⁱ "stealing a healing" is an expression coined by Rolf Jacobsen, Sermon Brainwave, SB612.