

Synthesis

A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship in the Episcopal Tradition

Epiphany 5 — Year B

February 5, 2006

Healed to Serve

The story of the Prophet Elisha and the Shunammite woman tells of the miraculous resurrection of a child that is similar to a story told about Elijah (1 Ki. 17:17-24).

Although Elisha resided at Mount Carmel, he often passed through Shunem, where a wealthy woman offered him hospitality. Convinced that Elisha was a “holy man of God” (2 Ki. 4:9), she built a room for him on the roof of her home.

Elisha wanted to reward her, and since she had no child, he declared that she would have a son. She did not wish to be the victim of false hope (v. 16b); but she did conceive and bear a son.

However, when the child was older, he had a sudden illness and died in his mother’s arms. The Shunammite woman laid the child on the bed in the room built for Elisha, and set out for Mount Carmel to find the prophet. After she fell down at his feet, he was ready to respond. He sent his servant ahead to take his staff and lay it on the face of the child as a show of his power; but the child was not revived.

The Shunammite woman was persistent, and insisted Elisha himself come back with her. The prophet went alone into the room where the child lay and prayed to the Lord. Twice he stretched out his body over the child and put his mouth upon the boy’s mouth. The child’s flesh became warm, and he sneezed seven times as he revived. When Elisha summoned the Shunammite woman, she “fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left” (v. 37).

Elisha is shown to be a powerful prophet and, as the Shunammite woman declared, a holy man of God.

In last week’s Gospel reading, the people were amazed at Jesus’ authoritative teaching and ability to cast out a demon. Today we see further evidence of the power and authority of Jesus.

In the first of three scenes, Jesus, after leaving the synagogue, goes with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew, where he is told that Simon’s mother-in-law

is ill with a fever. This account would indicate that Simon was married at the time of his call; and a reference in 1 Corinthians 9:5 suggests that his wife accompanied him on some apostolic journeys.

Jesus here *took the woman by the hand and raised her up*, and the fever left her. We are shown the importance of physical touch in restoring an individual to health and wholeness (cf. Mk. 5:23, 28, 41; 6:56; 7:32; 8:22).

The woman’s healing is displayed as she gets up and begins serving the guests. The word “serve” here is the same as that used when the angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness (Mk. 1:13). Later Jesus himself will use this verb to describe his own ministry as one who comes to serve (Mk. 10:45). Simon’s mother-in-law embodies the ideal of discipleship as service to others and foreshadows the actions of the women at the cross (Mk. 15:41).

The second scene begins at sunset, which marks the end of the Sabbath. Now people from the surrounding area bring to Jesus the sick or possessed. The whole city seems gathered to see what miracles would be performed by this man of compassion and power.

He does not allow the demons to speak to him as in Mark 1:24-26, because these demons knew him to be the Messiah (cf. Lk. 4:41). Here we see the beginning of Mark’s “messianic secret.” Perhaps Jesus enjoined silence about these incidents because he did not wish to acquire the reputation of being a local wonder-worker. His understanding of his vocation as Messiah went beyond this.

The third scene takes place early the next morning, as Jesus gets up and goes to a deserted place to pray. Such withdrawals of Jesus from the others were a typical part of his ministry. In the Biblical tradition, “deserted places” were points of contact with God. When Simon and the others found him they said, “Everyone is searching for you” (1:37). Perhaps they thought he was missing a further opportunity to reveal his power.

But Jesus answered them by saying that it was time to travel to the neighboring towns, “so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do” (v. 38). Thus Jesus continued throughout Galilee “proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (v. 39). The constant movement of Jesus in the early part of Mark’s Gospel points to the urgency of the message that Jesus proclaims: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near ...” (Mk. 1:15).

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

2 Kings 4:(8-17), 18-21 (22-31), 32-37; Psalm 142; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

In today’s reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes of the continuing power of the ministry of Jesus and the role of the faithful in proclaiming this power to the world. For his own part, Paul understood that it was necessary to meet people where they were and submit himself to their needs in order to reach them (9:19).

Similarly, in the Gospel passage for today, Jesus tended to the needs of those who sought him out specifically for healing, even though he himself perceived a different emphasis for his ministry.

Paul also knew that the externals of the way of life alone, whether for Jew or Gentile, could not bring anyone to God. But in speaking to Jews, Paul could relate as one under the law. To those who knew nothing of the law, Paul would show how his own relationship to God did not depend upon any such law: he was freed from the law in Jesus Christ.

To those who were weak, Paul would acknowledge his own frailty and need. He would become whatever he had to, in order to show others that they could have a saving relationship with God. “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (v. 23).

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” cries the apostle to the Gentiles. While ordained pastors engage in many beneficial activities daily, their essential calling is to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:26). As the police officer is empowered to make public arrests and the doctor is licensed to perform medical procedures, so the pastor is ordained to exercise a public ministry of Word and Sacrament.

In other words, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism makes all Christians personally responsible, while ordination goes on to make some Christians officially accountable. Baptism determines the pastor’s vocation as a person; ordination fixes the pastor’s occupation as an officeholder. Baptism empowers all Christians to witness to their own faith; ordination authorizes the pastor to administer the church’s means of grace to awaken and sustain faith in others.

—Copied.

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To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul’s own statements, who says in 1 Corinthians 9:19, “For though I am free from all ... I have made myself a slave to all,” and in Romans 13:8, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to the one who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was “born of woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4), and therefore was at the

same time free and a servant, “in the form of God” and “of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-7).

So a Christian, like Christ his head, is filled and made rich by faith and should be content with this form of God which he has obtained by faith. This faith is his life, his righteousness, and his salvation: it saves him and makes him acceptable, and bestows upon him all things that are Christ’s.

Although Christians are thus free from all works, they ought in this liberty to empty themselves, take upon themselves the form of a servant, be made in human likeness, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with their neighbor as they see that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with them.

—Martin Luther, Treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian” (1520), *LW* 31, 344, 366.

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Let us go somewhere else.

—Mark 1:38 (Moffatt).

At the very outset of the ministry of Jesus, as recorded by Mark, he evades two deadly dangers which have beset his cause ever since: he refuses to become localized; he refuses to become institutionalized. The future of Christ’s church depends to a large degree on the measure to which the paralysis of those same two calamities can be avoided.

It was natural that the townspeople of Capernaum should say, “Stay here!” Jesus’ healing had been a blessing to the town. His presence would become a permanent asset. He was among friends. What would be better than just to stay? To Jesus there was one thing better—the road to the world. He came not to be a town doctor but a world’s Redeemer. ...

Threatened, for the moment, by loving but mistaken hands which would have imprisoned him in a local provincialism, Jesus said, “Let’s go somewhere else.” In those words and in that spirit there was the universal destiny of Christianity, its unrelenting thrust into all the world. It broke through the

bounds of Judaism, broke out of the wider bonds of the Roman Empire, burst the bonds of Europe, across the Pacific. Christianity has lived because as each new frontier came into view, [those] with a spirit akin to their Master’s have cried, “Let’s go!” Always that preservation of Christianity as a world force has been won only by overcoming the seductive voices, which demanded, as on that first day at Capernaum, “Let’s stay.” ... The Christianity which degenerates into provincialism and forgets the call of the road speedily becomes a mummy.

Jesus’ departure from Capernaum, on the road that led eventually to Jerusalem, Calvary, and all the world, was a refusal to become institutionalized. The Prophet, the Teacher, the Redeemer, would have been transformed into a kind of impersonal clinic, a hospital and dispensary. Another institution, a blessed one of course, but still an institution, in the town’s life.

That subtle danger is never completely escaped and has strangled the spiritual life and power of Christ’s church again and again. Whenever Christianity has been expressed in a statement of doctrine, in a form of organization, and men say in satisfaction, “This just fits. Let’s keep it this way forever,” the institution begins to set like a plaster cast, throttling the spirit within.

It is inevitably so. The Christian gospel is *yeast*, not concrete. It should ferment, upheave, grow, not solidify. The hope of the Kingdom depends on the persistence of the Spirit of Jesus, “Let’s go somewhere else.” When Christianity is identified with any form of organization, the organization is soon substituted for the inner life. Then the church becomes like the man who said to his soul: “Now we’re all set. We have goods laid up for many years. We don’t need to think, or to plan or to work or to worry.” When he reached that stopping-place, of course, he stopped. His soul, his life was gone.

—Halford E. Luccock, *Preaching Values in New Translations of The New Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1928), pp. 99-101.



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“You Can Make Me Clean”



In the Biblical world, any number of chronic skin diseases besides Hansen’s Disease might have been described as leprosy. Nonetheless, those afflicted with such skin disorders were subject to a number of social restrictions and religious purification requirements.

Chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus provide specific directions in the case of such diseases. Lepers were considered “unclean,” condemned to live solitary lives outside the community, restricted from ritual as well as social life. Leprosy was thought to be punishment for sin; and for an individual to be cured of this dread disease was equivalent to being raised from the dead.

The account of the Syrian army commander Naaman is a part of the saga of the Prophet Elisha. Naaman is described as a “great man” and a “mighty warrior” who was afflicted with leprosy. The story begins with the faith of an Israelite slave girl who offered a way for her master to be healed. Ironically, a powerless young woman provided the means for healing that this powerful man did not possess.

She recognized that Naaman was a decent man, and told her mistress, Naaman’s wife, of God’s prophet in Israel who had performed great acts of power. If Naaman would go to this prophet, he would surely be healed.

Naaman went to the king of Aram, who wrote a letter to the king of Israel requesting healing for Naaman. Soon Naaman arrived in Israel with a full entourage and elaborate gifts. Upon receiving the letter, the king of Israel was greatly distressed, viewing the request as an impossible task that could be a provocation from his enemy. However, when the Prophet Elisha heard about the situation, he saw an opportunity to establish his own authority and reveal the glory of God.

When Naaman arrived at the home of Elisha, he was insulted when the prophet himself did not appear. Instead, Elisha sent a messenger who told Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman expected a magical ritual from Elisha himself, and felt that bathing in one of the rivers of his own country surely would be more effective.

But as he turned away in anger, his

servants persuaded him to do as Elisha had commanded. After all, bathing in the river was such a simple request. Would Naaman not have obeyed a more demanding regimen without question? Thus Naaman complied and was cured. He then went before Elisha and declared, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel” (2 Ki. 5:15b).

As a means of showing his allegiance to the God of Israel, Naaman took two bags of earth back to Syria as a reminder of the one God (v. 17). Naaman had crossed ethnic, national, and religious boundaries to go to Elisha; thus in Luke 4:27 Jesus refers to the healing of Naaman the Syrian as an example of a non-Israelite who was healed while the lepers of Israel rejected God’s saving help.

The Gospel text tells the story of another man who, like Naaman, was healed of leprosy. Parallel accounts are found in the other Gospels (Mt. 8:1-4; Lk. 5:12-16). Along with Luke’s story of the ten lepers (Lk. 17:11-19), these are the only New Testament narratives that deal with the healing of leprosy.

As Jesus was traveling throughout Galilee proclaiming his message in the synagogues and casting out demons, a man came to him with an appeal for cleansing. “If you choose, you can make me clean” (Mk. 1:40). Jesus, moved by pity at the sight of this outcast, reached out his hand and touched the man saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” (v. 41). Immediately, the visible signs of disease disappeared from the man (v. 42).

The healing itself occurs through the spoken word of Jesus, showing that Jesus is indeed empowered by God. By touching the man, Jesus acts out of a deep sense of compassion. To touch a leper was to violate purity laws, and by doing so Jesus crosses the boundaries of the law. As his ministry continues, Jesus will again and again step outside religious and social conventions to bring salvation.

This leper was not only cured of his disease, he was also brought back into the community. Like Naaman, this unnamed man had been given back his humanity. He was restored to wholeness in relationship to God and others.

Jesus then sent the man away, sternly warning him not to tell anyone.

He was to obey the customary rules by showing himself to the priest, who would certify that the cure was genuine. This process included making the appointed thank-offering (Lev. 14:1-54).

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

2 Kings 5:1-15ab; Psalm 42;

1 Corinthians 9:24-27;

Mark 1:40-45

The request of the leper was made in faith, and the cure was instantaneous. The Lord’s compassion was unending, as in all his encounters with needy people. But after the leper told others of his miraculous cure, Jesus could no longer heal openly.

People understandably came from everywhere seeking similar cures, so that Jesus had to withdraw from the settled communities. He apparently feared that news of his miracles would soon overshadow the call for repentance that was the core of his message to the world.

The Apostle Paul’s words to the Corinthians have no particular connection to healing or lepers, but are a call to life in Christ for those who have experienced the salvation that Jesus brings. Here Paul uses the language of preparation for an athletic contest as a model for spiritual discipline.

He speaks of a foot race in which only one can be declared the winner. However, for God’s athletes there is more to be won than a single crown of leaves that will quickly fade. Instead, there is an imperishable crown that can be attained by everyone.

The spiritual quest is not against a rival, but against one’s self. Thus, in order to achieve this goal, one must act with purpose: “I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air” (1 Cor. 9:26).

Paul goes on to say that whatever truth he has imparted to others—no matter how eloquently or effectively—it will do him no good if his own discipline fails. This is not a call for misplaced asceticism or a competitive spirit that sets Christians against one another. Rather, Paul calls us to so discipline our lives that we can *run the race to our best ability*, for the reward of sharing in the blessings of the Gospel.



Paul's stirring injunction in 1 Corinthians 9 rouses us out of apathy into the thick of the contest of life. His powerful image of a runner is not only a moving call, but also a sobering reminder of the difficult path one must take to gain the favor of the Lord.

Like runners, we must train daily for our race, working until our limbs are exhausted and our willpower has nearly disappeared. Since no runner can succeed without daily enduring great pain, so must we, like Paul, pummel ourselves into shape. We must repent until it hurts, forgive until it hurts, give until it hurts, love until it hurts.

We endure this continuous pain because our race is an ultimate one. There will be many losers, and their sorrow will be immeasurable. Few will meet the many strenuous requirements; few will, like Naaman, agree to do that which seems ludicrous or preposterous. But those who persevere, who willingly obey the Lord's commandments, will obtain that imperishable, invaluable wreath of God's merciful love.

But we are not left alone to struggle with the never-ending fight for self-discipline. Our Lord stands ready to aid us, eager to support our weakened bodies and spirits by taking on his own shoulders our immense burdens of sin.

He waits for us to grasp his offer of help with our request:

Lord God, mercifully receive the prayers of your people.
Help us to see and understand the things we ought to do,
and give us grace and power to do them,
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

—DSA

•••

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you:
Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God,
for ever and ever. Amen.

The Collect reminds us that God is the strength of all who trust in the Lord.

But in fact we need God's help and grace to exercise that very trust by which we can find strength to grow in faith. It is God who encourages us to take what certainly appears to be a risk in opening up ourselves, admitting our needs.

To admit that we are not self-sufficient is integral to real growth in our relationship with God. Indeed, if our human relationships are to have any real depth we must be willing to become vulnerable in them also.

To admit that God is our strength is to acknowledge our own weakness. When we do this we become open to receive God's strength. Once we glimpse the true epiphany of Christ it is impossible to keep silent. We may still have periods of doubt, but we can recognize that they are often mere reflections of our own desire to hedge, to be too sophisticated to be conned.

The result, of course, of cultivating this side of ourselves, is misery, whereas the result of exercising faith is the abundant life. If we live with true openness to God, even a meal where the menu is "tomato surprise" may prove to be a banquet.

The Gospel (Mk. 1:40-45) tells the story of a healing of a leper. The leper comes to Jesus in trust and faith. "If only you will you can cleanse me," the leper says. Jesus heals him and instructs him to say nothing to anybody, but to go to the priest to be certified as cured. But the healed leper apparently cannot contain his joy. There is not one word of reprimand spoken to or about the man's disregard of the injunction to silence.

This does not mean the man was right to act as he did. The action of the cleansed leper points to the fact that the messianic identity of Jesus could not be hidden. Mark is trying to show that Jesus did not come primarily as wonderworker, but as proclaimer of the Kingdom of God. It is only in his crucifixion that the secret of his identity is fully disclosed. The centurion at the foot of the cross can say, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" But even before his crucifixion, when people reached out in faith they found his healing love.

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Grace is getting something that you don't deserve; and mercy is not getting something that you do deserve.

—Francis Bacon.

After Christ had concluded his deeply impressive discourse, he dismissed the multitude and came down from the mountain with his disciples. Hosts of people attended him to Capernaum. A leper, who had probably heard of his miracles, and learned that he would pass that way, had planted himself by the road-side. Full of faith, he threw himself at the Savior's feet and said, "Lord, if thou wilt; thou canst make me clean."

After Christ had granted his petition, he bade him (as was his wont in such cases) first to do what the law—which He had come to "destroy" only by "fulfilling"—demanded, to show himself to the priests and offer the prescribed sacrifice, in order to gain readmission into the Theocratic community, from which he had been excluded as unclean.

—Augustus Neander, *The Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1855), pp. 237-238.

•••

FOR NO OTHER PURPOSE

This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. Just as it is easy to think the State has a lot of different objects—military, political, economic, and what not. But in a way things are much simpler than that. The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a couple of friends having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden—that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to increase and prolong and protect such moments, all the laws, parliaments, armies, courts, police, economics, etc., are simply a waste of time. In the same way the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.

—C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, quoted in *A Year with C. S. Lewis: Daily Readings from His Classic Works*, edited by Patricia S. Klein.



February 19, 2006



Authority to Forgive Sins



In the face of exile and destruction, the Prophet Isaiah proclaims that God is “about to do a new thing ...” (43:19).

Although Second Isaiah wrote during a time of exile and destruction, he perceived that God was even then preparing the way for the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon. Verses 18-20 describe their deliverance, with a road through the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Even the wild animals will give homage to the Lord. This will be a new exodus without the hardships of the former journey.

Isaiah recounts the failings of the people who broke their covenant relationship with God: “You did not call upon me, O Jacob” (v. 22). They no longer brought their offerings, but instead burdened the Lord with their sins and iniquities.

But in spite of all of this, the Lord is the one who “blots out” their transgressions (v. 25). Even though the people have forgotten God, God has not forgotten them. They deserve judgment, but God will forgive Israel because it is God’s character always to be faithful and forgiving.

This same faith and forgiveness process is fully manifested in Christ Jesus as seen in the Gospel passage for today.

The first chapter of Mark’s Gospel shows Jesus as one who speaks with authority, casts out demons, and heals disease. All of these actions inspire awe from the crowds. However, the events in Mark 2:1—3:6 show that his ministry also begins to evoke controversy and opposition.

This is seen first in the account of the healing of a paralytic man, which begins as a typical miracle story but evolves into a controversy with the religious authorities.

As the power and reputation of Jesus continued to spread, large crowds of people gathered around him. In this instance, so many people had crowded around the house where Jesus was staying in Capernaum that there was no room left inside—not even around the front door.

When four men arrive carrying a paralyzed man on a mat, they cannot get through the crowd to bring the man to Jesus.

Houses in Palestine often had a flight of steps built on the outside that led to the roof. The roof itself would most likely be made of mud and thatch. Not to be daunted by the press of the crowd, the four men make a hole in the roof and lower the man on his mat into the room below.

Impressed by the faith of the paralytic’s friends, Jesus responds with the shocking statement, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (v. 5). The passive voice of the verb used here indicates that God is the source of the forgiveness; but Jesus is the one who declares the pardon.

However, to the scribes present who hear this pronouncement, Jesus’ words amount to blasphemy, since only God can forgive sins (Ex. 34:6-7; Is. 43:25; 44:22).

Furthermore, the Law prescribed a process for the forgiveness of sins that required confession, a change of heart, and often a sacrifice for sin offerings (Lev. 4:1—5:13).

For Jesus to assume this Divine prerogative for himself was clearly blasphemous. Blasphemy was punishable by death (Lev. 24:16); and in Mark’s Gospel, this was the charge ultimately used to condemn Jesus.

Although the scribes do not openly challenge Jesus at this point, Jesus perceives their objections and asks whether it is easier to forgive the man’s sins or to heal his affliction. The scribes are now caught in a dilemma. In accordance with the common assumption of the time, illness was believed to be the result of sin (Ps. 103:3; Jn. 5:14; 9:2; Jas. 5:15-16).

Thus, if the illness is cured, then the sin is also forgiven. However, there is no visible evidence of forgiveness; so, in this situation, curing the paralytic of his infirmity *would* be evidence of Jesus’ Divine activity and authority.

Jesus then tells the paralytic to stand up, take his mat, and go home—as irrefutable proof that “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (v. 10). The man immediately stands up and goes on his way. Those who witness this miracle are amazed and glorify God.

Jesus makes no comment about the connection between sin and illness, as that is not the issue here. The healing of the man is symbolic of the deeper healing

of the forgiveness of sin. His actions also further illustrate a claim made earlier (Mk. 1:27b) about Jesus’ “new teaching” with an authority greater than that of the scribes (1:22).

But while these acts and words of Jesus elicit amazement on the part of eye witnesses who go on to glorify God, they also provoke opposition that will continue to escalate and eventually culminate in his death (3:6).

This same power of God *through Jesus* to save and restore is proclaimed by Paul as he writes to the Corinthians that Jesus Christ is indeed the “yes” and “Amen” to all of God’s promises. Paul in his own experience fully grasped the truth about the *forgiveness* that Christ brings.

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Isaiah 43:18-25; Psalm 32;
2 Corinthians 1:18-22;
Mark 2:1-12

His relationship with the faith community at Corinth was often strained, and after canceling a previously planned visit, Paul felt compelled to defend himself and his teaching. He thus writes this letter “out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2 Cor. 2:4).

He wants them to know that just as God is faithful, so has Paul been faithful in his own dealings with the Corinthians. Therefore Paul can declare in full confidence that all the promises of God have been fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

In Christ the promises of God are always “yes”; there is no “no.”

God’s work in salvation history reaches its climax in Jesus. Thus we can respond with “Amen” to the glory of God (1:21b).

Paul goes on to affirm that Christ’s followers can be confident of the presence of God’s Spirit among them, since they have been sealed and anointed in Baptism. This Spirit is the “first installment” (v. 22) that gives assurance of all God’s promises.

Thus we can celebrate the “yes” of God in our lives to *heal* and *renew*. Just as the Prophet Isaiah foretold, we can rejoice in the assurance that life in Christ brings forgiveness and wholeness. 

Mark is a masterful storyteller, using many action words to describe a scene. Today's Gospel from Mark vividly describes a story in which four people lower a paralyzed man down through the roof of a house. One wonders what causes them to take this extraordinary action—was it their desire that the man be healed, or their curiosity about this worker of wonders called Jesus?

Jesus simply announces to the man that his sins are forgiven. These words stir up controversy among the religious scribes, since they question how anyone can forgive sins but God. The story comes to a climax when Jesus tells the man to take up his mat and go home, amazing all who witness the event because the man was then *able to do so*.

In our liturgy the pastor speaks words of forgiveness to us: "I announce to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins." These words, spoken in the name of Jesus, convey God's power and authority. We no longer need to prove ourselves to God or others in order to realize our self-worth. We no longer need to worry about the guilt, inadequacy, or fear that keeps us from living a life of freedom and love. God is doing a new thing in our midst—bringing us from despair to hope, from death to life. The words of forgiveness give us the courage to take up our mats of sin and brokenness and walk with a new sense of confidence and hope.

As Jesus' words led to actions, such is the case in our liturgy. Christ comes to us in the sacramental actions of baptism and communion. Taken together, these words and actions surround us with healing and reconciliation. Forgiven by God, and strengthened by word and sacrament, we go forth into the world, our words and actions signs of God's gracious presence.

—DSA

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DON'T GET PONDEROUS!

There were some scribes sitting there pondering.

—Mark 2:6 (Goodspeed).

... Argued in their hearts (Moffatt).

Just like owls blinking in strong sunlight! Here was something they couldn't quite grasp. Jesus had just healed a paralytic. That was bad enough from their standpoint—a breach of ecclesiastical etiquette. But he had done

more—a shocking thing. He had said, "My son, your sins are forgiven." That set them pondering in a heavy, confused manner. The simile, "like owls," is more than fanciful. They were exactly that—wise owls—blinded by the fresh light which Jesus threw on life. They could find their way around in the dim region of legal distinctions; in the daylight of clear moral issues and spiritual values they were lost. They could only blink and ponder.

Jesus did not fit into any of the familiar pigeon-holes in the scribes' minds. That was what bothered them. They had no ready ticket or label for him. They did not possess the power or the inclination to think about him, to grasp his meaning, to look at him as a human being, to discover him as a divine revelation. That achievement could not be done by pigeonholing and all their thinking was of the pigeonholing character.

It is a pernicious substitute for thinking. The mental operations in a great many minds are like the process in a railway mail car in which envelopes are tossed, with a marvelous mechanical dexterity due to long practice, into different sacks. New ideas and personalities are tossed into preconceived notions and prejudices, regardless of whether or not they fit. That was what the scribes did. They had a large, roomy pigeon-hole labeled "Blasphemy" and they immediately tossed Jesus into it. He was speaking a new language. Therefore it must be blasphemy.

That type of "thinking" unfortunately did not pass from earth with the scribes of Jesus' day. It is the favorite and often the only exercise of lazy and narrow minds. It is responsible for the persistence of malignant prejudice of all sorts—race, class, and religious; and for the stagnation which keeps the world in ruts.

The pondering of the scribes never got beyond the business of rearranging legalistic precedents and traditions. When they "argued in their hearts" they never reached the realm of vital human need or spiritual realities. They did not live there. They pondered over quibbles. The deep need of the body and soul of this poor paralytic, which so moved the heart of Jesus, never touched them at all. They were fussing about some impertinent technicality. They missed the human values. Their estimate of life is as impertinent as the estimate of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, which might be given by a statistical pedant. He could

sum it up in a catalogue of the materials which went into it, so many tons of such and such kind of marble, arranged in such and such architectural patterns. It would all be true and utterly meaningless as an interpretation of the building. It would miss two things, both spiritual realities, the beauty of the structure and the moral values symbolized. Nor would it convey the "still small music of humanity" which sounded out over the world through Lincoln's great soul.

Philip Guedalla in his book, *The Second Empire*, has a memorable description of a latter-day scribe, one of the ministers of Napoleon III of France: "... A professional aptitude for detail and a forensic profusion of second-rate reasoning"!

Alas, how closely they fit the multitude who has, like the scribes, "nullified the law of God through their tradition"! Do they fit us? The whole scene whispers to us: "Don't get ponderous. Look what it leads to."

—Halford E. Luccock, *Preaching Values in New Translations of the New Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1928), pp. 101-104.

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The church is one because Jesus Christ is one; the church is holy because Jesus Christ is holy; the church is catholic because Jesus Christ is the saviour of all; the church is apostolic because as the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. In other words, if we are to understand the nature of the church at all, we are to understand who Jesus Christ is and what he does.

—Rowan Williams.

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Do not be one who stretches out his hands to receive but closes them when it comes to giving. If you have earned something by the work of your hands, pass it on as a ransom for your sins. Do not turn away from those who are in need, but share all things in common with your brother.

Your heart shall not cling to the high and mighty, but turn to the good and humble folk. Accept as good whatever happens to you or affects you, knowing that nothing happens without God.

—From the Didache, in *The Early Christians*, ed., Eberhard Arnold.



February 26, 2006



Transfigured in Glory



The Transfiguration of the Lord is celebrated on August 6, but it is also observed on the last Sunday of Epiphany as a transition to the season of Lent. The scene of Jesus transfigured on the mountain highlights his majesty and glory as we move into the season of his Passion. All three of the Synoptic Gospels include this dramatic event (cf Mt. 17:1-8; Lk. 9:28-36).

Immediately following Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah (Mk. 8:27-30), Jesus makes the first of three predictions of his coming Passion and Resurrection (8:31-33). Jesus is aware that his ministry will be denounced, and that he himself will be put to death. Therefore his disciples must be made aware that *there is a glory that no execution can suppress*.

Thus Jesus takes Peter, James, and John and leads them up a high mountain—probably Mt. Hermon, Carmel, or Tabor. This height will offer them both privacy and a symbolic closeness to God. The sense of mystery and awe escalates as Jesus is “transfigured before them.” His clothes became “dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” (9:3).

Appearing with Jesus and talking with him are Elijah, first among the prophets, and Moses the lawgiver. These two figures point to Jesus as the one who fulfills the law and the prophets. They also add an eschatological element. Elijah was swept up into heaven on a whirlwind (2 Ki. 2:11); and according to Malachi (4:5), his return would be a sign of the coming of the day of the Lord. No one knows where Moses was laid to rest (Dt. 34:6), so there is mystery surrounding him as well.

The disciples are overwhelmed by this blinding display of God's glory. In their confusion and awe, Peter proposes that they build booths for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. By erecting temporary shelters such as those constructed during the harvest festivals, they can remain and prolong this experience.

They are then overshadowed by a cloud of Divine presence (cf Ex. 40:34-38; 1 Ki. 8:10-11). With words that recall the Baptism of Jesus (Mk. 1:9-11), the Lord speaks: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (v. 7; cf Mk. 15:39).

With the revelation complete, the

vision leaves them, and Jesus is alone with his disciples. As they come down from the mountain, Jesus commands them to tell no one about it until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead (v. 9). Only then will they begin to understand what has happened here.

Some scholars contend that the transfiguration was actually a Resurrection appearance; while others point to apocalyptic aspects. In any case, the vision affirms the glory and authority of Jesus, and points to the coming of God's Kingdom.

The writer of 2 Peter assumes that his readers are familiar with the Transfiguration as evidence that Christ will come again in glory. Such teachings are true and not merely “cleverly devised myths” (1:16). The promises of Jesus are supported by the eyewitness of the Apostles who heard God declare that: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17; 17:5). Peter saw for himself the majesty of Jesus; so he proclaims the vision as a confirmation of the power of the Risen Christ to be fulfilled at the Second Coming.

Peter goes on to say that believers should pay attention to this prophetic word, a “lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (v. 19b). This *lamp* is the prophetic message itself; the *day* that dawns refers to the Second Coming. The *morning star* in their hearts indicates the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which brings transformation.

The passage ends with a warning about the proper interpretation of Scripture, which must rely on Divine guidance and not human understanding alone, “because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (v. 21).

The sense of awe and mystery at the Transfiguration is also present in a mountaintop experience of the Prophet Elijah. Elijah had fled Mt. Carmel in fear for his life from Queen Jezebel, after slaying four hundred prophets of the fertility god Baal (1 Ki. 18:1-40).

He was filled with despair and he wished only to die (19:4). An angel appeared and brought him food and drink. This gave him the strength to

travel forty days into the wilderness until he came to the cave at Mt. Horeb (19:5-8). Elijah's forty-day sojourn in the wilderness is reminiscent of the forty days and nights that Moses spent on Mt. Sinai receiving the words of the covenant (Ex. 34:27-28).

As Elijah sat at the mouth of the cave, the Lord came and asked, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v. 9). Elijah answered by saying that although he had been “zealous for the Lord” (v. 10), he was a failure, for Israel had forsaken God's covenant. He alone was left of all the prophets, and now his life was in danger.

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

**1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 27;
2 Peter 1:16-19 (20-21);
Mark 9:2-9**

Then God told Elijah to stand outside the cave and wait for the Lord to pass by. So as the prophet waited, there came a wind that shattered rocks; then an earthquake; and then fire. All are typical manifestations of the Divine presence—but the Lord was not in them.

After all of this, there was “a sound of sheer silence” (v. 12)—or a soft murmuring sound. When Elijah heard this, he went to the mouth of the cave, where the Lord repeated the question of verse 9. When Elijah responded with the same answer of verse 14, the Lord gave three specific commands.

He was to anoint Hazael as King of Syria and to overthrow Ahab and Jezebel by anointing Jehu, son of Nimshi, as King of Israel. Finally, he was to anoint Elisha to be his own successor as prophet. In addition, Elijah would know that he was not alone. Seven thousand who had not bowed to Baal would accept God's revelation.

This episode establishes Elijah as a prophet like Moses. The revelation in the cave is similar to that in the cleft in the rock where God passed before Moses (Ex. 33:18-23). Moreover, despite the initial despair of Elijah, God does not withdraw from him. Elijah cannot escape his tasks as God's prophet and will accomplish the things that God commanded (19:19-21).



Our Epiphany season ends as it began, with a brilliant light leading us to see Jesus—the saving Light. Whereas the star announced the birth of the Savior, Jesus’ transfiguration sends its message in a more complex way. The vision of the glorified Christ, combined with the voice (“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”) seems to be clear enough. We might ask why this experience was granted only to three disciples, and why at this midpoint of our Lord’s ministry? What does this vision of the glorified Christ mean for us as we move into the season of Lent next Wednesday?

There is a symmetry between the three glorified ones and the three frightened disciples. Three who were faithful, who had done (or would do) the hard work of faith, showed themselves to three who would soon be called upon to take important steps of faith. The central figure, the Beloved, the Son who had come from God, would soon begin taking steps toward Jerusalem, toward the death that would unite all believers—past, present, and future—into the glory of God.

There is no direct route from where we are to that glory. Rather we must repent and walk with Christ on the way of the cross. We must, through our baptism, daily take his death as our own. That is why we descend the Mount of Transfiguration and put on the ashes of Lent.

The vision of the glorified Christ remains with us. We see it; we hear it; we taste it, as we eat of the foretaste of the feast to come. We have seen “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4); and we shall know it fully, on the other side of the cross.

—DSA

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Different people: different experiences. Here is a strange and mysterious event the details of which could only have come from the recollections of the three disciples present when it happened. Before trying to understand the meaning of the Transfiguration it may be useful to stop and think about religious experiences and about the language employed to describe them. Those forms of religious experience in men and women will normally reflect their underlying personality or psychological characteristics and conditions. For some the mind will be the primary point of living encounter with God. Others will come to

the same encounter chiefly through the emotions. In whatever form encounter occurs it is a spiritual experience that calls for an act of will by which a person responds to the Divine revelation. There is sometimes a tendency for one form of encounter to be valued more highly than another. This cannot be right. The same God made the mind as made the emotions. Reason without emotion can be cold and lacking empathy and affection. Emotion without reason can be misleading and individualistic. Reason, emotion, imagination, definition, spontaneity—these are but parts of the totality through which God discloses Himself and invites response.

Different people: different words. All deep human experiences are difficult to describe in words. Poets probably do it best for they can give expression to thoughts and ideas in a way that communicates with the emotions as well as the mind. It is important in reading or hearing other people describe their religious experiences to remember that the language and imagery of description varies from person to person.

The language of heaven. Here we have a description of what Peter, James and John experienced in the company of Jesus shortly after He had explained to them the suffering and rejection that lay ahead of Him and of them if they continued as His disciples. That reference to suffering and rejection was so contrary to their expectations that it must have caused deep inroads into their previous confidence that Jesus was the Messiah. The three disciples when they recounted their experience on the mountain used language that certainly conveys an awareness that in some vividly recognizable way Jesus was seen not in the light of the present world but in the light of eternity. He was seen too in the company of Elijah the prophet and Moses through whom God gave the Law. These representatives of the Law and the Prophets faded and Jesus remained. There is no doubt that for these three disciples, and for the early Church that preserved their testimony, this experience was a Divine revelation that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Listen and learn. The response of Peter to this awesome and overwhelming experience was to blurt out words that suggested some way by which the sharpness and wonder of the moment

could be prolonged. Peter’s declaration was met by a voice from a cloud. The cloud as symbol or assurance of the Divine presence was well known to the Jewish mind. If a voice was heard it could only be the voice of God. That voice said two things. First it attested to Jesus as ... *my beloved Son.* ... Then it said, *Listen to Him.*

The gift of silence. Listen ... is guidance most people find it difficult to follow or obey. Listening involves being silent ourselves, and self-silence frightens us. So like Peter we are inclined to blurt out, where silence would be much more profound. This is particularly the temptation when suddenly confronted by some other person’s sickness, sorrow or misfortune. So one encounters the joker and jolly-up man visiting someone in hospital or the person who offers instant platitudes to the distressed or bereaved. Strong indeed is the compulsion to speak; this fear of being silent; this temptation to trivialize; to use instant words as a shield against the sharpness of the great issues of life and death, of time and eternity. There is the same reluctance to honour silence in our private devotions and public worship. But unless we are prepared to be silent how can we *Listen to Him.* Silence too can be the most valuable gift we give to a friend in need of comfort or consolation.

Life’s jig-saw. The final few verses of this section contain references to the disciples keeping secret the revelation they had received on the mountain until ... the Son of man should have risen from the dead. This reference to Resurrection must have been difficult for the disciples to understand in reference to Jesus. Secrecy and inability to appreciate the meaning of Jesus’ teaching may help to explain why the disciples seemed so unprepared when the persecution and suffering did come. But then it is the usual sequence that we only understand the pattern and meaning of life as we look back and see that the various pieces of life’s jig-saw do make some recognizable pattern. After the Resurrection of Jesus the disciples could appreciate the meaning of experiences and teaching that during their Lord’s earthly life and ministry had been beyond their comprehension.

—Gordon McMullan, *Reflections On St. Mark’s Gospel* (Clogher, N. Ireland: Clogher Diocesan Publications, 1984), pp. 64-67.



We have choices about how to respond to the mountaintop transfiguration events in our lives. We can ruin them with “if onlys” (if only I could stay here longer; if only things would never change; if only I could relive that experience). We can reminisce about our experiences, caressing and massaging them as an excuse to disengage from the world. Or we can allow them to prepare us for what God calls us to do next.

God’s response to Peter is clear: “Jesus is more than a prophet like Moses. He is my own Son. And he is more than Elijah, the one portrayed as a rescuer of sufferers and a restorer of Israel. Jesus is my chosen instrument, my chosen servant, for all the nations. No booth building here! In him, I myself have chosen to pitch a tent with people, dwell with them and restore them to myself.”

... There is more. With Jesus’ exodus he was rescuing us, God’s people, out of slavery by releasing us from all those things that have an unholy hold on us—work or money or death—and by placing his own blood on the doorposts of our lives. ... This talk about Jesus’ upcoming exodus suggests that disciples—then and now—should live as God’s people did on the night of the Passover. They were not weighed down with sleep or other concerns, but listened attentively to what God was doing in the world.

Listen to Jesus, God says. We will hear Jesus saying that he will be with us in the wilderness and in all the exits and exoduses of our lives. At the last, entry and not exit is our destiny. “Welcome home” will be the words we hear then. For now, we hear, “Come, my beloved, chosen ones—follow me out on the road again.”

—Phyllis Kersten in *The Christian Century* (Feb. 7, 2001).

...

The transfiguration comes at a critical point in Jesus’ life, a point of major transition as he shifts from his active ministry among them toward Jerusalem, the place of his death and resurrection, the place where human and divine will intersect.

And knowing how hard it would be for his disciples to understand this, just as it is still hard for us to fully understand, Jesus takes his closest disciples and heads up a mountain. There they come into the presence of God, and their hearts and souls are opened to see what their eyes can barely believe.

Their friend and teacher, the very human Jesus, is transfigured before them. The appearance of his face changes. His clothes become dazzling white. They sense the presence of Moses and Elijah. ... God perceives their fear and responds by

speaking to them. God wants them to begin to understand how this Jesus, fully human, is also fully divine.

The story of the transfiguration of Christ functions, Henri Nouwen says, as something of an icon; it offers access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. There, high on the mountain, the familiar face of their beloved friend and teacher is revealed in a new light, and in that light their hearts can hear the voice of God saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Icons have long been important to the Orthodox churches of the Christian family. Painted in egg tempura on wood, these tools for prayer and liturgy most often depict scenes of Christ, Mary and the saints. Created according to rules handed down from generation to generation, icons are venerated as representations of the divine, windows through which the soul can see the realities of the kingdom of heaven. Their purpose, as Nouwen explained, is to pull one into the image in order to see through it and beyond it to the heart of God, to the reality of the great Mystery.

—Patricia Farris in *The Christian Century* (Jan. 25, 2005).

...

We ... hear those instructions—“say nothing” ... in our gospel. The story is a familiar one. The disciples, as is so often true (and comforting) in the gospel of Mark, are bumbling and clueless. They see the transfiguration, and their response is preservation. They want a fixative. They offer to build tents for the transfigured Lord and the appearing prophets.

On the way down the mountain Jesus says something that strikes his followers as awfully strange, even impenetrable. He insists that they tell no one of their mountaintop experience until after Jesus rises from the dead. The questions for us, as for Peter and Co., are two: What could this “rising from the dead” mean, and why were the disciples forbidden to speak of the transfiguration until after that rising?

It is the task of Lent to prepare us for the answer to the first question. What does this rising from the dead mean? As Paul will tell us throughout this season, it means absolutely everything.

But there is still that pesky second question: Why should Jesus care whether or not folks talk about his “dazzling white” transfiguration and his confab with Moses and Elijah? Indeed, one might think spreading the story of the transfiguration could help convert a few unbelievers.

The key to Jesus’ instruction is the timing. He doesn’t forbid his followers to talk about the transfiguration ever; he enjoins them to tell its story only after he has risen from the grave. What Jesus (and Mark) realize is that on its own, the story of the transfiguration could be misleading, for it might suggest Jesus’ uniqueness came primarily from his earthly ministry. In reality, Jesus’ kingship comes primarily from the cross. To tell of the transfiguration without telling of the resurrection would be to live only in Epiphany and never wind one’s way into Easter. The story of the transfiguration is a perfect bridge between the two.

—Lauren F. Winner in *Sojourners* (March/April 2003).



HYMNODY

Opening Hymn 135 “Songs of thankfulness and praise”—*Salzburg*. As we begin this last liturgy of the season of Epiphany, we recount in this hymn the various occasions of “God in man made manifest” (all stanzas). The final stanza sings of the Transfiguration, of which we read today.

Gloria in Excelsis Continue with the setting chosen for Christmas/Epiphany; or just for today use **S 236**, “Glory to you, Lord God of our fathers,” *Benedictus es, Domine*, which so beautifully pictures the resplendent Jesus in glory.

Sequence 137 “O wondrous type! O vision fair”—*Wareham*. This hymn tells the story of the Transfiguration and offers a variety of approaches to singing—unison, four-part harmony, and descant.

Offertory Hymn 133 “O Light of Light, Love given birth”—*Elmhurst*. This gorgeous setting by Cary Ratcliff offers yet another telling of the Transfiguration story, and on stanza 3 summons “all faithful hearts adoring” to bow to the King of glory. Take care to offer a good leading solo stop on the organ (or solo instrument) to assist the people in confidently singing the melody.

Communion Hymns 324 “Let all mortal flesh keep silence”—*Picardy*. **314** “Humbly I adore thee”—*Adoro devote*. **619** “Sing alleluia forth in duteous praise”—*Martins*.

Closing Hymn 122 (to 559) “Alleluia, songs of gladness”—*Dulce carmen*. This is a splendid text with which to end Epiphany (with its correlation to all of the readings today)—especially when sung to this alternate tune, which most people will know and be able to sing heartily.

I Memorials to die for.

It's a development Peter could never have imagined, as he spoke of constructing memorial dwellings on the Mount of Transfiguration: video headstones.

John Pain, Associated Press business writer, reported this on September 8, 2005:

MIAMI - Video screens have shown up all over in recent years—cell phones, bathrooms, car head rests, subway cars, even elevators. Next up: a solar-powered video panel embedded in a tombstone that plays a clip reminiscent of "This Is Your Life."

Tasteless, you might say? A magnet for vandals?

On the contrary, says inventor Sergio Aguirre.

His soothingly named Serenity Panel is all about helping families celebrate the life of a lost loved one.

"While nothing ever replaces the gift of life, memories can now come one step closer to forever being remembered and not forgotten," waxes the Web site of Aguirre's company, Vidstone LLC.

The video headstone concept has been around for years, but previous inventors' ambitions have been laid to rest. One gave up for lack of demand and out of concerns his invention wouldn't be able to withstand years of harsh weather.

That's not deterring Aguirre, who quit his telecommunications job last month to work full time on Vidstone. ... [His] device plays a 5-to-7-minute video featuring special moments from someone's life that would be compiled by anyone from friends and relatives of the deceased to funeral homes.

The Serenity Panel's screen is covered by a solar panel, which can be flipped open by visitors. Once opened, the video starts.

The device includes two standard headphone jacks to listen to the audio. The solar panel protects the screen from sun damage and charges a battery inside, Aguirre said. Four hours of sun provides enough juice to play the video continuously for up to 90 minutes. ... The Serenity Panel should be ready for sale in October and cost about \$1,500, including the use of video-making software.

Just imagine the applications possible on the Mount of Transfiguration: scenes from Moses' life flickering on a video screen, showing the crossing of the Red Sea, and the perilous trek through the desert as he led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Or picture Elijah's video, with a

replaying of his miracles—even raising the dead and defeating false gods—and his final ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire ...

Nope. That is not the sort of response Jesus expects from us when we've gone with him up the mountain, to the pinnacle of the experience of acknowledging his uniqueness as Son of God.

And it matters what we do about all this when we descend from the mountain as well.

But let's begin at the beginning of the story ...

II A glimpse of "the world that is not of this world."

When Peter, James, and John climb the mountain with Jesus, they have little or no idea of the new "perspective" they are about to be given. In Luke we find the detail that they even fell sleep (9:32). To say that they were unprepared for the light show and unprecedented revelation of this Event is an understatement.

Of all the personal interactions that Jesus had with these disciples during his ministry, the Transfiguration is the most remarkable. This experience gave them a new take on reality, and especially a new way of thinking about the person of Jesus.

While the disciples did not move directly into believing that Jesus was the Divine Logos or the Second Person of the Trinity, they could, after this, no longer see him as a peripatetic carpenter and preacher from Nazareth. He could no longer be pigeonholed as a liberal Pharisee, or even a prophet comparable to the two who appeared alongside him in glory: Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the consummate prophet (Mk. 9:5).

That is why the Transfiguration is primarily for these three disciples, the men who will lead the church in Jerusalem. This is clear for a number of reasons.

First, Peter's startling confession at Caesarea Philippi is here confirmed: Jesus is the Messiah (8:29).

Second, the voice is addressed to them, not to Jesus: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (9:7b). Whereas the Voice at Jesus' Baptism starts with: "You are ..." (1:11)—now it begins with, "This is ..."

And third, the command, "Listen to him!" is meant to override the disciples' reluctance to receive the unthinkable news Jesus gave them earlier with his Passion prediction—that they, too, would have to take up their cross and follow him (8:32-34).

The Transfiguration also meant, and means for us today, that we cannot share

the light of the Gospel unless we ourselves have seen manifestations of the Lordship of Jesus in our lives.

The Gospel is meant to be experienced. We have to taste of the "world that is not of this world" in order to be able to tell others about its importance. Otherwise, religion boils down to ethics or is reduced to the cultural equivalent of superglue. In either case, sharing the Gospel becomes a form of "the bland leading the bland." Evangelism becomes a moral cause, rather than an irresistible urge to share the story that has changed our life—what Paul describes in its core as "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

Separated from the mystery that lies at the heart of the Transfiguration, Jesus comes across not as the embodiment of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the Wholly Other—but as the religious equivalent of fire insurance.

While we might value such insurance, it isn't the sort of gift for which one makes memorials. Something much bigger had happened—on the mount, epiphany became a way of life.

III Ministry in the valley.

C. Robert Allred writes that the experience of Transfiguration necessarily leads us to service.

"Peter, John and James enjoyed the Mountain Top Experience of seeing Jesus in all of His Glory, but Jesus knew that their ministry with people lay in the valley ahead. Indeed, if they had stayed on the mountain top, what would have happened to the little boy whom they found waiting for his healing back in the valley? [Lk. 9:37f] Just as Jesus' Sonship was revealed on the Mountain Top, back in town his power over evil was seen when he rebuked the demon in the child.

"Our ministry is in the valleys of life where people are hurting. Evil remains rampant in our world. Forces still threaten human life. Families are more fragile than ever. Disease seems more prevalent. Just when science develops a cure for one malady, another comes forth. Poverty, hunger, crime, violence, racism, elitism, and the never ending threat of world war. ...

"Ours is a message of hope and redemption. It is the same message that Jesus commissioned the first disciples to go out into all the world and proclaim. Not only do we have our life transfiguring experiences here, we march forth possessed by the power to proclaim hope to a hurting world of humanity that God loves." —HKO



Isaiah knew his congregation. His word from the Lord spoke into the chaos and confusion of a people who had suffered not only a disruption of life, but also a disrupted understanding of God. Their cherished expectations of what it meant to be the covenant people had crumbled along with the destruction of Jerusalem. God had allowed this destruction of their naive theology, and now they were exiled from both the land and the notion that God would protect them. It was this befuddled congregation that assembled to hear Isaiah's sermons.

The old prophet doesn't pull any punches. Yes, he said, they were being judged for their sins and the judgment was severe. But that was not God's ultimate purpose in sending the Babylonians to drag the Hebrews away. The real purpose was to call them to a deeper understanding of the covenant.

Every Sunday pastors face congregations filled with people who have experienced a similar sense of disruption and who are a long way from where they thought they would be. Their lives and their naive theology have been interrupted by God—not just for judgment, but for salvation.

Sometimes an interruption is wonderful. You take a long look into someone's eyes and realize that somehow you have fallen in love. You don't quite know how this happened, but your life has changed. Sometimes the interruption brings crisis. You find a strange lump on your body and the test results aren't good.

Usually the interruption is subtle. You're vacuuming the living room, then glance out the window to see your five-year-old son playing in the backyard. He's wearing a ridiculously large baseball mitt and trying to catch a ball he keeps throwing up in the air. You begin to cry. Or on the way to church you see a huddled old woman pushing a cart full of empty cans. Through all the hymns and sermon you can't get her out of your mind. Or you glance in a mirror, see your parent looking back at you, and wonder how that happened.

These interruptions don't just surprise us. They propel us into a strange new future. Since this means giving up the life we have known, we will be tempted to resist the interruption. But God never lets us spend much time in the past. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." But the problem with God's future is that you have to take a hard

road through the desert to get there.

In the Bible the desert wilderness is a strange and threatening place. There were no back-to-nature movements in those days. Nobody wanted to enter the wilderness because it was a severe land where people easily died. If they had to cross it, they did so as quickly as possible. In the wild places you had no reassurances, no security, no reason to think you'd be OK. Except that God had brought you there, and God alone would bring you through. That is why the wilderness is the enduring biblical metaphor of a hard place in life where faith grows. And faith is our ticket to the Promised Land.

—Craig M. Barnes in *The Christian Century* (March 23, 2004).

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On my good days, I spend time praying the scriptures appointed by the lectionary. And on about half of those days, the lectionary makes me want to scream in frustration. Sometimes a given day's readings don't seem to have anything to do with one another; other days they feel just plain irrelevant to what's going on in my life.

But this week is one that reminds me of the wisdom of the lectionary, for here the readings begin to head out of

Epiphany and into Lent, and draw our attention to the forgiveness of sins. As we have dwelled this season on the nature of Jesus' ministry, we now see that his entire ministry points to what Virginia Theological Seminary professor Reginald Fuller has called "the supreme epiphany": The cross.

Isaiah doesn't mince words when it comes to forgiveness. Israel has transgressed, she has failed to bring God sacrifices and offerings, she has failed to call upon God, she has "burdened [God] with ... sins." But God's nature is to forgive (in the words of the liturgy, God's "property is always to have mercy"). Isaiah assures us that God "blots out" our transgressions and forgets our sin.

The gospel makes even more explicit the connection between Epiphany and Lent, for in the healing of a paralytic (the fourth healing so far in Mark) we see a crowd of hecklers do the epiphanic task of recognizing Jesus for who he is, coupled with Jesus' bold forgiving of sin. Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man points our attention to the day when he will forgive our sins. And if we understand that, if we understand that Jesus is the one who came to forgive us, we have done the work of Epiphany, and are prepared to enter Lent.

—Lauren F. Winner in *Sojourners* (Jan.-Feb. 2003).



HYMNODY

Opening Hymn 410 "Praise, my soul, the King of heaven"—*Lauda anima*. This hymn offers praise to Christ who ransoms, heals, restores, and forgives (s. 1). This favored hymn provides opportunities for various approaches with four-part harmony, an harmonic variation on stanza 3, and a splendid descant on the last stanza.

Gloria in Excelsis Continue with the setting established for Christmas/Epiphany.

Sequence 472 "Hope of the world"—*Donne secours*. This ancient melody (1551) is set to a text by Georgia Harkness (1891—1974), which petitions for God's Spirit to "heal earth's wounds" (s. 2). It also sings of "the love thy mercy gave us" (s. 4); and proclaims "we would be faithful to thy gospel glorious" (s. 5). With a variety of accompaniments (reminiscent of the Renaissance) this all-unison setting should be quite appealing.

Offertory Hymn 493 "O for a thousand tongues to sing"—*Azmon*. This joyful hymn summons "a thousand tongues to sing" praise to Jesus. Stanza 5 sings of Jesus' healings and brings to mind today's Gospel Lesson on the healing of the paralytic man: "and leap, ye lame, for joy!"

Communion Hymns 469 "There's a wideness in God's mercy"—*St. Helena*. **697** "My God, accept my heart this day"—*Song 67*. **763** (*Wonder, Love, and Praise*, Church Publishing) "As we gather at your table"—*Raquel*.

Closing Hymn 657 "Love divine, all loves excelling"—*Hyfrydol*. The Opening Collect today petitions for God's greatest gift, love. This hymn ends the liturgy with a text petitioning for that same love, "pure, unbounded" (s. 1)—as the people depart to serve God by carrying that love to others.



I. Something called love.

Yesterday my husband and I went to see the Luc Jacquet documentary, *March of the Penguins*. Its incredible scenes of hordes of huddled emperor penguins withstanding Antarctic blizzards made us instinctively lean toward each other for warmth in the slightly cool theater.

As Bernd Heinrich writes in his *New York Times* review of the movie.

There they came trudging along, straight upright on stubby legs, shoulders swinging back and forth with each step. Fuzzy at first, their dark silhouettes started to come into focus on the screen just as I was eating my first bite of popcorn.

Hobbits, maybe? No. We already knew from the movie's title that they would be birds. Then Morgan Freeman's otherworldly voice informs us that these beings are on a long and difficult journey in one of the most inhospitable places on earth, and that they are driven by their "quest for love." ...

As the movie continues, everything about these animals seems on the surface utterly different from human existence; and yet at the same time the closer one looks the more everything also seems familiar. Stepping back and viewing from the context of the vast diversity of millions of other organisms on the tree of life ... these animals marching across the screen are practically kissing cousins to us. ...

Which brings me back to Mr. Freeman's use of the word "love" in the context of the penguin's behavior. The unspoken rule is that this four-letter word is to be applied only to one creature on earth, homo sapiens. But why? ...

Could rationality alone induce a penguin to trek 70 miles over the ice in order to mate and then balance an egg on his toes while fasting for four months in total darkness and enduring temperatures of minus-80 degrees Fahrenheit and gusts of up to 100 miles an hour? And bear in mind that this 5-year-old penguin has just returned to the place of its birth from the sea, and thus has never seen an egg in its life and could not possibly have any idea what it is or why it must be kept warm. Any rational penguin would eventually say, "To hell with this thing, I'm going back for a swim and to eat my fill of fish." ...

The penguin's drives to persist in proximally bizarre behavior in the face of what must otherwise be overpowering temptations to do otherwise also suggests that they love to an inordinate degree. Where they differ from us is that they can "love" an egg as much or more than a peeping fuzz-ball of a hatchling (Aug. 26, 2005).

How does our own love measure up in this context? Somehow, sharing one's box of popcorn and hot coffee in a frigid theater doesn't even serve to compare!

II. "In your soul you will discover the stairs by which to ascend"

—St. Isaac the Syrian.

The story of Jesus' love for the paralytic man in today's Gospel is a picture of inordinate love. Mark tells the story from the standpoint of his own view of Jesus. The method here is clearly to showcase Jesus' authority not only to heal, but to forgive the man's sin.

*Patience and
love are the
way to God's
heart.*

We have no idea of the back story, what the man's particular sins might have been, or whether Jesus "read" them on his face. ... Suffice it to assume that in any situation needing love, needing healing, there always exists failure to have "done what we ought to have done"—mixed in with a fair amount (at least) of doing what we ought not to do.

In the Hebrew tradition, any transgressions would have been expected to yield consequences. And even the man's physical condition would have given pause: What did this man *do* to be so debilitated? The act of blaming the victim, consciously or otherwise, is not unknown to us in our age, either.

But Jesus' love for the man transcended all assumptions, all difficulties (as the friends of the man overcame the restraints of crowdedness and inaccessibility to the house).

We read that Jesus saw their faith—and at that point turned to the afflicted man and said: "Son, your sins are forgiven." It sounds like love—and mercy. But the scribes saw it as something else: blasphemy against the One God who only can forgive sins.

Why didn't the healing come first, setting aside doubts as to Jesus' authority? We might almost say that Jesus saw through to the stairway in the man's soul. Physical healing was certainly important. But the way to a life with God was possible only by dealing with the condition within, by providing an unhindered way.

Jesus knew that he himself was that Way, and given the choice of saying first, "Get up and walk," or "Your sins are forgiven"—he had already put first things first.

It always takes the crowd, the authorities, and sometimes even the person being healed a little longer to grasp the true situation. In this case, the visual demonstration of the man taking up his mat and walking at Jesus' command was more graphic than any explanation could be.

What was not visible to the naked eye was the transformation within—how many people were changed besides the man himself?

"They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'"

St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Nineveh in the late seventh century, wrote of the forgiven heart as "The Kingdom Within." It is fruitful to compare this concept to Isaiah's vision of the "Peaceable Kingdom" to which God would prepare a way. There new rivers would wash arid wastelands just as God's forgiveness cleanses from sin.

St. Isaac wrote:

Be at peace with your own soul:
then heaven and earth will be at
peace with you. ...

The ladder that leads to the kingdom
is hidden within your soul.

Flee from sin ...

and in your soul you will
discover
the stairs by which to ascend.

The man who couldn't on his own effort climb to the roof had found that inner staircase.

III. The forgiven heart.

As a beautiful song in the musical *Oliver!* asked: "*W-h-e-r-e* [a five-note stretch] *is love?*" Well, we know it when we see it—and especially when we experience it.

Walter Bell Denny wrote in *The Career and Significance of Jesus* (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1933):

"The ground on which Jesus forgave this man's sins does not seem to be the man's penitence at all. Not a word is said about repenting, nor is there any indication that Jesus knew anything about his past life.

"... The way to God's heart is not through the burden of keeping the precepts of the Law and the Traditions. But neither is it by believing in some miraculous apocalyptic mission of Jesus. Patience and love are the sure road to God's loving heart." —IA

Two men with leprosy, two contrasting stories of God's healing powers. We've already read two stories of healings in Mark. Is there anything to be learned by slogging through more?

This week's gospel story feels familiar. It has all the ingredients of Jesus' healings: A stranger, a touch from Jesus, a miracle. The story should be outlandish, shocking, or, at least, attention-getting. But to us, even those of us who might approach such miraculous healings with cynical modern eyes, stories like Jesus and the leper are a touch domesticated.

We've heard them in Sunday school for so long. The story of Naaman is more jarring. This story is one of my absolute favorites, right up there with Emmaus, and Jonah and the whale. I admit that I like Naaman for wholly narcissistic reasons—he reminds me over and over of myself.

Naaman is a powerful military leader, a commander for the King of Aram, but he has leprosy. Through the unlikely testimony of an anonymous Hebrew slave-girl, Naaman hears of a powerful prophet in Israel, Elisha. Naaman makes his way to Samaria, is eventually directed to Elisha, and then hears an unexpected message: "Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan," says Elisha, "and your flesh will be restored."

Seven dips in a river? That wasn't what Naaman was expecting. He was expecting drama, magic. He was expecting the prophet to wave a magic wand and, poof, a cure. When Naaman finds that the work of God is sometimes utterly ordinary, he is not just disappointed, he is "angry" (2 Ki. 5:11).

Like Naaman, I often find that I want God to behave one way, and when God refuses to go along with my expectations, I get ticked off. These stories tell us more than that God can miraculously heal our bodies. God also works in ways we don't always anticipate, appreciate, or like.

And there's more at stake here than physical health or glowing skin. In Naaman's healing we have a precis of the tools God uses to work out our salvation. Ordinary tools like water, and ultimately a carpenter from Nazareth. To be healed of sin, we must all submit to the same, not-very-dramatic cure Naaman finally accepted: A simple baptism in water accompanied by a simple faith. As Matthew Henry wrote in his commentary on 2 Kings, "The methods for the healing of the leprosy of sin are so plain. ... Believe, and be saved; repent, and be pardoned; wash, and be clean."

—Lauren F. Winner in *Sojourners* (Jan./Feb. 2003).

...

There is an odd reticence about the healings in the lessons for this Sunday—there's an expectation of big-bang pyrotechnics, followed by a matter-of-factness in the healings that seems to disappoint. The haughty Naaman is downright offended by the simplicity of Elisha's prescription for curing his leprosy. I thought he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place. ...

But nothing that glamorous is planned: Naaman should just go and wash himself in the river. The river! As if he hadn't tried washing before. As if the river Jordan were somehow a better river than the great rivers of Syria, his own country. Naaman is like the man in an old joke who is caught in a flood and goes up on the roof, where he intends to wait for God to rescue him. Person after person comes by in a rowboat, offering to take him to safety. No, thanks, he says. I know God's going to save me. Finally the waters rise over him, and he dies. When he gets to heaven, he complains, I prayed and prayed, but you didn't save me! And God answers, I sent four rowboats and you didn't get into any of them.

We don't claim the healings that

come to us. Instead, we set the evidentiary bar so high for a miracle of healing that a dozen miracles happen to us and we don't notice any of them. For us, a miracle has to be magic, full of special effects, before we'll pay any attention. But most of the miracles we know are like rowboats. They come along regularly, but you have to get into them to get the full effect. When it comes to miracles, we are snobbish.

Who is it, after all, who encourages Naaman to go along with Elisha down to the river and wash, as the holy man has told him to do? His servants. Who persuades him to seek out Elisha, the famous holy man, in the first place? A little slave girl whom his soldiers had kidnapped from Israel. People without pretensions. People who have little to lose by looking foolish. People who know they don't count for much in the worldly scheme of things.

Here's the clue: there aren't special miracles for "important people." They don't heal differently from poor people but are simply other brothers and sisters in pain and sorrow, and in sharing the same joy in Christ. The unimportant go first in the order of this kingdom, leading the way for the rest of us. The hierarchy of worldly privilege is gone, and blessings tumble abundantly over everyone.

—Barbara Crafton in *The Christian Century* (Feb. 8, 2003).



HYMNODY

Opening Hymn 616 "Hail to the Lord's Anointed"—*Es flog ein kleins Waldvoegelein*. The Epiphany season focuses on the many acts of God manifested through Jesus on earth. This hymn summarizes the sacrificial life and love of Jesus. The musical setting is quite appropriate to begin worship and process the sacred ministers.

Gloria in Excelsis Continue with the setting established for the Christmas/Epiphany season.

Sequence 546 "Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve"—*Siroe*. Today's Epistle from 1 Corinthians 9 stresses the importance of running the race "in such a way that you may win it." This hymn reinforces that notion and promises "an immortal crown" as a prize for running "a heavenly race" (s. 1).

Offertory Hymn 411 "O bless the Lord,

my soul!"—*St. Thomas*. This hymn text, a paraphrase of Psalm 103, could be the song of thanksgiving and praise of the two men healed of leprosy in today's Lesson and Gospel. We share in this song mindful of our own experiences of grace and healing.

Communion Hymns 658 "As longs the deer for cooling streams"—*Martyrdom*. **339** "Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness"—*Schmucke dich*. **734** (*Wonder, Love, and Praise*, Church Publishing) "You laid aside your rightful reputation"—*Intercessor*.

Closing Hymn 552, 553 "Fight the good fight with all thy might"—*Pentecost* or *Rushford*. This text aligns well with today's Epistle and offers a grand "send out" for worshipers. The choice of tune should be based on which your congregation will best sing.



I. Putting love into practice—in Jesus’ steps.

John Rollefson wrote about Albert Schweitzer in the online column “Sightings” (9/1/05):

Ninety-nine years ago a brilliant young theologian published his four-hundred-page study of how scholars of the preceding century and a half had variously attempted to understand Jesus. More often than not, he found, they had discovered in their research into the “real Jesus” a mirror image of themselves and their own ideals. The young scholar concluded his study with these memorable words: “As one unknown and nameless he comes to us, just as on the shores of the lake he approached those men who knew not who he was. His words are the same: ‘Follow me!’ and he puts us to the tasks which he has to carry out in our age.”

This thirty-one-year-old professor and principal of the theological seminary in Strasbourg, an ordained Lutheran pastor in the Evangelical Church in Alsace, already the holder of degrees in the fields of theology and philosophy, had just the previous year published in his spare time a well-received study in French of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Moreover, he was himself a celebrated organist and recitalist, as well as an expert on organ building.

The previous fall, this philosopher, theologian, pastor, musicologist, and musician had begun medical studies leading to yet a third doctorate. Nearly a decade earlier, at his home in his father’s parsonage in a little Alsatian village during the summer vacation of his twenty-first year, he had suddenly been struck by the thought of how incomprehensible it was that he should be allowed to lead such a happy, carefree student’s life while around him so many people were contending with care and suffering.

One brilliant summer morning, he later wrote in his autobiography, “there came to me as I awoke, the thought that I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, but must give something in return for it. ... While the birds were singing outside, I settled with myself before I got up, that I would consider myself justified in living till I was thirty for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time forward to the direct service of humanity.” He concluded: “Now the answer was found. In addition to the outward, I now had inward happiness.”

And so, at age thirty, the young double doctor resolved to become a doctor of medicine, as he explained it, in

order “that I might be able to work without having to talk. For years I had been giving myself out in words and it was with joy that I had followed the calling of theological teacher and of preacher. But this new form of activity I could not represent to myself as being talking about the religion of love, but only as an actual putting it into practice.”

These healings in Mark are about that very thing: *putting love into practice*. Today we look at Jesus’ miraculous healing of a “skin patient”—

*“The blind
see, the lame
walk, the lepers
are
cleansed ... ”*

bearer of a repulsive, scaly condition of one kind or another that has fallen under the Biblical description of “leprosy.” Jesus, in his treatment of such outcasts in the Gospels, illustrated the difference between a “disease” and an “illness.”

II. Cured—or healed?

The expression “moved with pity” doesn’t really capture it (Mk. 1:41). When Jesus saw the physical condition of this man, he reacted with something of the vehemence he must have felt in casting the moneychangers out of the temple.

Putting the love of the Father into practice, Jesus reaches out his hand and cures the man’s disease. Then it is a matter of following the prescribed laws for reporting the change in his condition, and seeking restoration to the community through the approval of a priest.

But there is something else going on here—a second healing that involves more than the disease of “leprosy.” It is a restoration from illness—the man’s *response* to his own disease: his entire human experience of being afflicted.

British physician Sir William Osler once told his students: “Ask not what kind of disease the patient has; ask what kind of patient has the disease.”

The flaky skin condition and rotting flesh was only part of the man’s dire situation. Here was a man ostracized from society, severed from contact with his

own people, forced to live on the bleak outskirts of all that is warm and human and supportive and inclusive.

How does one recover from such an “illness”?

Edward F. Markquart writes in “Sermons from Seattle”:

“Deep down inside, when cancer, or heart attacks or AIDS, or any equivalent disease strikes, people often feel that God is punishing them. People think, ‘God is punishing our family.’ Or ‘Why is God picking on us?’ Or ‘God has deserted us.’ Or ‘there is no God at all.’ But it’s just the opposite. In Jesus of Nazareth, we heard the words, ‘moved with pity.’

“God has not been moved by punishment, moved with desertion, moved with his non-existence. When God sees us with our diseases, God is always moved with pity. Ours is a God of mercy and healing. It was never the will of God that we should suffer from diseases. There is not one passage in the New Testament where it says that Jesus caused an illness. Not one passage.

“In fact, it is just the opposite. One time John the Baptist wanted to know if Jesus was really the Messiah, and Jesus said to him, ‘Well, John the Baptist, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, help and healing are in me.’ ...

“Our God is a God of healing.”

III. Only believe.

When Jesus sent the restored leper to be certified by the priest, according to the law of Moses, this meant that it was his desire to see the man healed as well as cured of the ailment. Then he could return to the community—accepted, reinstated—not only cured, but healed.

Do we have the faith and love to have pity, to reach out our hands to the unappealing, to see others transformed from the inside out, rejoicing, full of thanks, and able to enter into the joy of the Lord? Will we take the necessary steps—following Jesus’ steps?

Dorothy Day has written:

“If I did not believe, if I did not make what is called an act of faith (and each act of faith increases our capacity for faith), if I did not have faith that the works of mercy do lighten the sum total of suffering in the world, so that those who are suffering in this ghastly struggle somehow mysteriously find their pain lifted and some balm of consolation poured on their wounds—if I did not believe these things, the problem of evil would indeed be overwhelming.”

—HKO

I'm not sure why it is—maybe because at heart I am a pessimist and a doubter—but every time I hear a “success” story of a miraculous healing, deep down I think about the alternative situation when healing did not take place.

Of course we all are going to die, and if we live long enough, we are all likely to suffer. The ancients knew a lot more about suffering than we do, thanks to our living in a time of scientific miracles.

The Prophet Elisha receives hospitality from a Shunammite woman, and for this he rewards her—first with a son, and second with a resurrection of the child after he has apparently died. My first thought is, “How wonderful”; my second thought, immediately upon the first is, “How come that child is singled out for healing?” *It's not fair.* Why doesn't God cure the child down the street who has the same illness? Why are some children in remission while others are suffering death throes?

If we thank God for healing, should we curse him when there is no healing? I don't know any of the answers. Perhaps we'd be better off if our theology was more like that of the Buddha, who accepted suffering as the central fact of existence. Why is death the great enemy, when all die? We worship a Lord who overcame death, and our hope is for the eventual resurrection of all the dead. Because he lives, we, too, shall live. Meanwhile, we suffer and we die, and “to the Lord we make loud supplication.”

—SEA

...

Jesus could sympathize with our burdens, because they were his as well. He watched those whom he knew and loved diminish physically before his very eyes. He lived at a time when his country was occupied by foreign forces. He knew the consequences of armed conflict. It was for the purpose of lessening human burdens that he went about preaching and driving out demons.

We might be tempted to wonder why, if he was so powerful, he allowed suffering to take hold in the first place. Why were people afflicted with disease or possessed by demons? And today—Why do the elderly poor languish in the cold? Why do innocent children bloat from malnutrition? Why is our future cut down on the battlefield? Why have we been assigned months of misery?

Questions like these have never really been satisfactorily answered. Instead of telling us why, Jesus shows us how. Without denying our own need for comfort, he directs our gaze toward the

needs of others. How are we to deal with the tragedies of life? We are to approach those who suffer, grasp their hands, help them up; to heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds.

Paul learned this lesson well. Following the example of Jesus, he offered himself in service of others, becoming all things to all people. Can we do less? Can we continue to allow the elderly to languish? Or the children to starve? Or hatred to rule the world? Can we continue to allow misunderstanding to fester in our families, alienating us from those with whom we share life? Can we continue to support bigotry or indifference? Can we continue to allow such demons to possess us today?

At the time of Jesus, people believed that the world was locked in a mortal battle between good and evil forces that were cosmic in nature, but that played out their conflict in human history. These forces were represented by angels and demons. Understanding this perspective, we realize that the Gospel story is not only an account of healing and exorcism, but one that describes the power of God in Jesus casting out the forces of evil in the world and establishing there the reign of God.

Today our understanding of the structure of the cosmos may reflect more closely that of Carl Sagan than that of the Gospel writer. But the ancient perspective does provide a way of understanding some of the suffering in life. We are

indeed at war, not only with some identified human opponent, but with forces of evil that are much more comprehensive in scope. And the battle is fought within each one of us.

It is not only addictive personalities that seem to be possessed. In a sense, we all have our demons. Traditionally, we have referred to these mysterious destructive forces as the seven capital sins: pride, anger, envy, gluttony, lust, avarice, sloth. They may come disguised in different garb today, but these are the demons with which we all struggle. Every evil in the world can be traced back to one or more of these forces.

[We are] right to cry out against such a life ... for if we merely accept it, we will do nothing to change it. If we do not acknowledge the demons that seem to hold sway in our lives, in our world, we will not struggle to cast them out. Although the readings for today begin with a cry of desperation, they end on a note of triumph. The suffering people in the Gospel came to Jesus and were healed and set free. If, like them, we seek him out and open ourselves to the power of his compassion, the forces of evil in our lives and in our world can be driven out and the reign of God will be established. This burdensome life really holds promise.

—Diane Bergant in *America* (Feb. 3, 2003).



HYMNOLOGY

Opening Hymn 1 “Father, we praise thee, now the night is over”—*Christe sanctorum*. This is a morning hymn of praise to the “Monarch of all things” (s. 2), Jesus, who went about teaching, preaching, healing, and casting out demons. The hymn is sung in unison and makes for a fine hymn in procession.

Gloria in Excelsis Continue with the setting begun on Christmas Eve.

Sequence 443 “From God Christ's deity came forth”—*Salem Harbor*. Again we sing of the many manifestations of God made known through Jesus: his Oneness, his teaching, his mercy, his coming to earth to heal, and ultimately, his glory. This five-stanza unison hymn requires imagination of the accompanist to keep the text alive with creative approaches for choir and congregation.

Offertory Hymn 538 “God of mercy, God of grace”—*Lucerna Laudoniae*. This beautiful setting of David Evans to a

classical tune of Henry Francis Lyte provides a petition for “light divine” to fill the Church, a fitting text for any Sunday during the Epiphany season. The four-part harmony is advised for singers on both stanzas.

Communion Hymns 321 “My God, thy table now is spread”—*Rockingham*. **312** “Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands that holy things have taken”—*Malabar*. **777** (*Wonder, Love, and Praise*, Church Publishing) “Heal me, hands of Jesus”—*Sharpe*.

Closing Hymn 371 “Thou, whose almighty word”—*Moscow*. End the liturgy with this familiar tune and text, which petitions for the light of Christ to brighten the darkened world. A strong unison on the first and fourth stanzas is recommended, with four-part singing on stanzas 2 and 3.



I Pomos among us.

Marcia Ford has written in *Publishers Weekly* (1/17/2005) in “Pomos Toward Paradise” of how a new subcategory is defining some Christians in the midst of a postmodern world:

When Jossey-Bass published Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* in 2001, the term “emerging church” was largely unknown, while the much-used “postmodern” was becoming passé. But today, both terms—and the online shorthand term “pomos” for postmoderns—are freely used to describe a segment of Christianity that is influencing the church, the culture and the publishing industry. That influence is widely attributed to McLaren’s book, which also helped propel him to the forefront of the movement.

“As the world changes into some as yet undefined new reality, some liberals and conservatives are finding a desire to be in conversation with each other about the path ahead,” said McLaren, a suburban Washington, D. C., pastor who calls the emerging church a “conversation” rather than a movement. “They’re asking questions about what it means to be a Christian in a postmodern, postcolonial world.”

All that questioning forced a rethinking of what the church is, how it needs to change and how it can better relate to a secular society. That in turn resulted in such an influx of new books that in 2003 the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association added an “Emerging Church” subcategory to its Church and Ministry category, defining the content as “addressing the complex issues of our world’s ongoing cultural shifts and the impact this will have on the local church and its ministries.”

That description also could easily apply to recent evangelical books outside the Emerging Church category, such as two last year from InterVarsity Press: James Emery White’s *Serious Times*, focused on living amid conflicting worldviews and postmodern “turbulence”; and *The Truth About Tolerance* by Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, about engaging in civic debate without compromising the truth.

As the Emerging Church name implies, the movement is one that has not fully arrived. Those taking part in the movement wouldn’t have it any other way. A resistance to anything final and formulaic sets pomos apart from the modernist’s emphasis on science, reason and propositional truth. Pomos see faith as a journey that integrates core values such as community, relevance, relationship, transformation, mission, story and interaction with a post-Christian

culture (from Publishers Weekly Online).

But where, we might ask, in this new approach to “churching,” does *healing*—the basic restoration of souls—fit in?

II “The temperature of the spiritual life of the church is the index of her power to heal” —Evelyn Frost.

Healing ministry has been described as simply “the Divine response to human need.” And nowhere do we find this power being channeled more dramatically and effectively than through Jesus’ works on earth.

In today’s Gospel Jesus models the generosity of the Father in healing Peter’s mother-in-law and restoring her to her life of service. There is no greater fulfillment and purpose than in being a vessel, able to be used for God’s purposes and for the good of those around us.

God’s own compassion is evident in the details of Jesus’ healing ministry: his listening to and perceiving individuals’ needs, his touching, his admonitions to go forth, back into the world, in a restored and healed condition. He embodied the power to heal at its most powerful levels, showing us forever in a human life that the main work of the church, of his extended Body, is that of connecting others (along with ourselves) to the power that God gives freely, as we have the faith to receive it.

A look at hands-on and hearts-in healing (or lack of such ministry) is one way to take the “temperature” of the church in its day-to-day life. When we reach out to the needs of our own community—*acting locally*; as well as *thinking globally*—responding to the needy in world disasters . . . we become part of this healing chain. We carry the loving, restorative power of Christ beyond our imagined borders and spread healing to amazing dimensions.

We become Christ to each other.

III The power of a breakable heart.

But as in all endeavors, such a stretching has its costs. As C. S. Lewis wrote: “To love is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it up carefully around hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

In our Gospel today, Jesus has listened for the voice of Abba, his Father—and the call at this time is to go

on, even though he could be “useful” where he already is. It is a courageous decision. People won’t understand. But the doing of the will of the Father *is* his true vocation and worship.

Turning to God with all our might, and doing what our hand finds to do *is* authentic ministry. And it is possible in all circumstances, in all of our lives. Healing those closest to us calls us to *commitment in the present moment*.

Esther de Waal has written in *Living with Contradiction* (Harper & Row, 1989) about learning to sanctify the present moment, and to see all things as sacred and God-given:

“One lesson we learn from today’s Gospel text is that when we might least expect an epiphany, God is right there with us—in the house, in the kitchen, in the sickroom. Recently I read these words about the Rule of St. Benedict which remind us of that reality, and of the reality that ‘mission’ sometimes means staying at home, doing our work: ‘The Rule does not call us to heroic deeds. Instead St. Benedict is telling me that my way to God lies in the daily and the ordinary.’

“If I cannot find God here and now, in my home and in my work, in my daily routine, in the things that I handle in the kitchen or in the office, then it is no good looking for him anywhere else. That is why the Rule is concerned with minute directions about the right ordering of daily life in the monastery, chapters which might at first seem tedious, irrelevant, remote.

“For underlying all these instructions about the porter, the servers in the refectory, the right ordering of the psalms or the right sort of help for daily duties, is this principle. Good order, the right use of space and time, and above all the way in which we handle things, all these are essential to finding and living out a full and fulfilling relationship with the material world around us.”

Avery Brooke gives us the following prayer in *Plain Prayers in a Complicated World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1993):

O Christ, as you taught us:

Help us not only to be fair but to be generous.

Help us not only not to fight but to make peace.

Help us not only not to steal but to give.

Help us not only not to lie but to search for the truth.

Help us not only not to do wrong but to do right.

Help us not only not to harm those who harm us but to forgive and help them.

Help us not only to love but to serve you. *Amen*.

—IA