



Your faith makes you well?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne March 22, 2009

Call to worship from Psalm 40

*More and more people are seeing this:
as they enter the mystery, and abandon themselves to God.
Yes, blessed are those who give themselves over to God,
who turn their backs on the world's "sure thing,"
and ignore what the world worships.
Instead, come to God and worship him,
For just doing something for you, Lord,
bringing something to you—that's not what you're after.
Being religious, acting pious—
that's not what you're asking for.
And so I answered, "I'm coming,
I'm coming to the party you're throwing for me."
For you O Lord have entered my life,
and you have become part of my very being.*
(adapted from The Message)

Song: Awesome in this place

*Here in this house of the great king
We've come together now to worship him
This house is built on Christ our rock
Cannot be shaken, cannot be shaken
God is awesome in this place
We sense his presence as we sing his praise
There is power here for miracles
To set the captives free, and make the broken whole
God is awesome, he's so awesome
God is awesome in this place ...*

Introduction to solo: There is power here for miracles. God is awesome. Well, that's very good to say and lots of fun to sing. But is it true? Do you believe there is power here for a miracle to happen this morning? What's more, do you expect any miracles to happen today? Or is church more of a safe place for you, a quiet place for an hour where you can find some peace, perhaps be refreshed, maybe even challenged to think about life in new ways? All that's nice, but ... It is possible that you will come to think of worship services as a habit, a good habit of course. Or maybe worship will become a duty for you. I've often wanted to put two black lines across the rug in the carpet as a salute to the few people who each week are brought to church dragging their heels. No need to raise your hands and confess it, if that's you. But of course, worshipping God is a whole different thing if you come expecting God to work a miracle or two. That expectation would make worshipping an adventure. You might ask yourself, then,

is this a day when miracles could happen, or just another smile and say "good-to-see-you" kind of Sunday? Folks, let's get this one answered now. For in a few minutes you'll have a chance to ask God to be present with you, you'll have the chance to ask him to set you free from anything holding you captive, you'll have the chance to come forward to receive the bread that can give you a sense of communion with God, and you can, if you wish, come over to be anointed and ask for God to touch you and heal you. Yet those things can only happen for you if you trust God has the ability to show up and show his power in your life. Do you believe God has that power? I don't know about you, but I can tell you this: I am not interested in playing religious games or going through the motions of worship here. I need more than that to become whole. So I do not want to waste another minute or take God's love for granted. No, I want to feel his Holy Spirit rushing over me ... How about you?

Solo: Heal Me

music recorded by Aaron Jeffrey

*It's another good-to-see-you Sunday morning
Oh, I hardly hear the words roll off my tongue
Looking in myself for signs of something that's long gone
Oh, I stumble through a verse that says you love me
As the voices echo, my thoughts drift away
And I close my eyes, ashamed I'm feelin' nothing I pray
Heal me, heal these eyes, heal my heart, heal my mind
Breathe your breath of life
Heal me, wake my soul from this sleep
Give me back the joy of when I first believed ... Heal me
Oh, I lose myself to one more day's indifference
When my eyes are everywhere but fixed on you
I don't have the strength to overcome this distance,
but you do, you do
I don't wanna waste another minute
takin' all your love for granted
I just wanna feel your Holy Spirit rushing over me,
Heal me ...*

Reading: Matthew 8:1-3

Some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your

hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." And he stood up and went to his home.

Introduction to the message: C S Lewis in his book *Miracles*, claims that when so many things are said to be miracles when they are clearly too small or trivial a thing for God to do, it gives ammunition to those who do not believe in miracles and who want to shoot them all down. So when you get a parking spot in front of a restaurant on a rainy night or when your child wonders how Santa gets down all those chimneys and you tell them it's a miracle, then somehow all miracles get smaller. Every miracle seems to shrink and they become less believable. Now maybe God can help you get a good parking spot, but it's hardly likely God is spending his time arranging the traffic conditions for your convenience. I don't want to diminish miracles, indeed, I want to make sure you know how much bigger miracles really are. Only to do that, I think we need to understand miracles better. Then it will be easier to believe in them, and even, to expect God to work miracles in our day.

So far we've learned some basic rules about miracles. For instance, we've seen how miracles were not meant as magic tricks, but instead were ways to teach something about God that mere words could not express. In a way, the miracles are acted out parables. That's certainly the case here in today's story of healing. When Jesus heals the man who is laying on a stretcher it's to teach the crowd about God's power, but it's also a way of acting out in real time and in a real way, that God's power to forgive is every bit as strong as his power to heal. Certainly, as you can see in this story, the man who is healed is also transformed, inside and out. God's power certainly is made clear when in our weakness. Here God does something the man could not do for himself. And you'll note that Jesus was not fulfilling a mere wish here, healing is not done on a whim, it's done to make someone whole. That's a big deal. It's certainly a bigger deal than finding a convenient parking spot. Becoming whole is the whole reason Jesus came to be with us ... in Hebrew the name Jesus means both "God saves" and "God heals" at the same time. Notice too that as we saw in last week's story of healing, Jesus treats the man on the stretcher as if he were the only one there. He cares so much about the man he does not mind that the crowd gets upset. For to Jesus, the man on the stretcher is not just some face in the crowd. He's a person whom God loves with all his heart. That means he matters very much.

Some people say these kinds of miracles of healing don't happen any more. For a few centuries the church itself taught that the age of healing was over after Easter when Jesus was no longer walking around. Not many churches teach that any more. The evidence of God's activity here and now is compelling. I know people who have been healed miraculously, in ways

that doctors could not explain. Remember this: God's power and God's purpose have not changed. It only make sense that God's practices have not change either. Who says miracles of physical healing do not happen anymore?

Well sure, most modern people do, to be sure. But then we modern folk are used to things like lapriscopic surgery and angioplasty, transfusions and transplants. Personally I am on a daily dose of a low level chemotherapy and I have to give myself a shot every week for my Rheumatoid Arthritis. Some call those treatments the miracles of modern science. Only they aren't really miracles. They don't fit the pattern at all. And anyway, science knows how those drugs work. Healing happens through drugs, but it can also happen in unexpected and unexplained ways. That's what really bothers scientists and modern folk. Scientists don't like not knowing things. Modern folk question everything it seems. Only sometimes they all seem to miss the evidence that's right in front of them. Take for instance this article from Thursday's *Washington Post*. The headline reads (and no, I'm not making this up) "*Reasons for higher birthrates among teens remains unclear.*" Reasons for higher birthrates are unclear? Why? Don't higher birthrates come from more pregnancies? And I believe science has now discovered what causes pregnancy. It seems to me there's no real mystery about this ...

Nor to me is there any mystery when it comes to healing. I believe all healing is godly. Medicine and doctors help it along. Chicken soup and bandaids are good things. And don't forget to drink plenty of water and get some rest. Still, the process of healing is something God always has his hands in. Sometimes he may work through the medicine. That's why I take my meds. Sometimes God may choose to heal through the hands of the doctors. That's just the same as saying sometimes God serves the needy through your actions on behalf of others. But then, there are other times, perhaps when you are weakest, or when God wants you to learn something about his power, and in answer to your faith, God may heal you in a way that can not be explained by science. That's not a surprise to me at all. That's simply part of the plan of creation. Frances MacNutt, author and nationally known

expert writes:

The healing acts of Jesus were themselves the message Jesus had come to set us free, they were not just to prove his message was true. Healing is simply the practical application of the basic Christian message of salvation, a belief Jesus means to liberate us from personal sin and from emotional and physical sickness. I don't see how we can really believe the central tenet of Christianity -- that Jesus is our Savior -- unless we also believe that Jesus wants to heal us physically and spiritually.

[F MacNutt, *Healing*]

Simply put: God wants to make you whole. Healing is natural to God, if not to you and me. However, healing has not always been something I understood. Years ago as a young priest I was asked to offer a healing service at my church. It was not

I don't see how we can really believe the central tenet of Christianity--that Jesus is our Savior-- unless we also believe Jesus wants to heal us physically and spiritually.

something I had ever been taught about. So I visited a charismatic church in the area run by a man I respected. I asked him about healing, explaining that I did not understand it. Maybe on one level I did not trust God's promise to heal people. So I asked him about healing. We talked for a long time about how God wants to make us all whole, and sometimes he does, and sometimes he doesn't. Then the pastor reminded me we need to see healing from God's perspective. He told me plainly the ultimate form of healing is not to be perfectly healthy, but to enter the kingdom of God when life here ends. For no one lives for ever in this world, even if you are healed today you will die sometime in the future. But those who trust God are invited to be enter God's kingdom where they will be, at last, made whole. It is a place we are told where there will be no more sighing or crying or dying, and God, God himself will wipe every tear away from our eyes. That's where I will be really healed and whole.

God wants you to be whole here in this life too. Physically healed, spiritually whole, emotionally free, and forgiven. That's not a mystery to me. What is much more mysterious is how and when God heals people. Why do some people receive a miraculous touch and others seem to bear heavy burdens for so long? In one of my first churches I met a blind man named Bill. He was gentle and friendly, but from time to time his inner anguish would come out. He was a faithful man, but could not understand why God had not healed him as he had healed others in the Bible. What was wrong? I did not have an answer for him. I still do not. How and why God heals one person and not another is a mystery I will not be able to unravel for you this morning. I can't make it all neat and easy. I can't give you the magic formula for what to pray to be sure you or your loved one gets a miracle. But I can help you understand how God works. And certainly remind you how God does not work.

There are a lot of misunderstandings here. I worked as a hospital chaplain in both New York City and in Norfolk. I've met people who tell me that God will heal them and they don't need their meds. Only that turned out to be a false faith. I had one guy on dialysis tell me he didn't need the doctors because he could sleep with one Bible at his head and another at his feet and he would be cured. He wasn't. Others told me they were afraid they were sick because they had sinned. Or they had not yet been healed because maybe they did not have enough faith. I was told this too by a couple who attended Church of the Spirit for a while, ten years ago. Without my permission they sat in me in the middle of a room and laid hands on me and prayed for me to be healed of my Rheumatoid Arthritis. When, after a half an hour of prayer, I did not say I felt any differently they were disappointed. Once I had thanked them for their prayers and left the room they announced to the rest of those present I was not healed because I simply did not have enough faith. So is that your problem too? Or is the real problem that people simply misunderstand God's plan?

Notice what Jesus says. Jesus heals this paralyzed man because of his faith. Like many other stories of healing we have this kind of formula. Jesus says, "Go in peace, your faith has made you well." Well now, what does that mean?

Here's where things unravel. Faith may save you but it all depends on what you put your faith in. Some people mistakenly believe they need more faith in faith itself. If they only have enough faith they will be healed or see a miracle. There are some churches that tell you to name it and claim it ... meaning that if you publicly state you believe you will be healed God will make it happen. Who says? I don't find that in my Bible. It seems to be more of a way of manipulating God. Once you've announced that God will heal you, do you think God has to come through or else he'll look bad? It's just like the time the IRS

auditor came by the church to ask about someone he was investigating. The auditor said, "We're conducting an investigation on Bruce Smith. Mr. Smith claims he gave the church \$100,000. Is that true?" The pastor replied, "It sure will be." Only you can't get away with telling God what to do. That's certainly not faith.

I'll be the first to admit I don't have much faith in faith. I don't have a lot of faith in myself either. I do have faith

We need to take ourselves less seriously, and God more seriously." It's not my faith that heals, it's God ... and I have faith in him. I trust God with whatever the outcome. I don't tell God what he has to do to earn my faith. I simply choose to trust him.

in God, however. Or as MacNutt says plainly enough, "We need to take ourselves less seriously, and God more seriously." It's not my faith that heals, it's God ... and I have faith in him. I trust God with whatever the outcome will be. I don't tell God what he has to do to earn my faith. I simply choose to trust him. I do not threaten to take my faith somewhere else if God does not come through just the way I want or expect. If God does not give me the miracle I want I will still trust him. I'm not in it for the miracles, I'm in it for God. Sure enough I pray, and ask God for his help, I ask God to heal people every day. I wait patiently, knowing God will make us all whole if we trust in him. For some that may happen quickly, for others it may develop over time, for some it may only happen in eternity when God wipes those tears from our eyes once and for all. But make no mistake, even if you can't understand all the details, God's plan is to make you whole. Me too.

Maybe one of the reasons you do not experience miracles more often is a certain timidity in believing they can happen at all. What it may take to see God's miracles more often in the world around you is for you to take God more seriously. If you trust in him you'll trust he has the power to make miracles happen. Whether or not you get the exact miracle you want, I can't say ... except I know this: in every prayer I say for myself, or for you all, the last thing I say before "Amen" is a simple phrase. It is simple, yet it describes the depths of this sort of trust in God I've been talking about. If you can not say it yet, you may not yet be able to trust God completely. It's simply this: "Your will be done Lord, not mine." Would you say that with me? "You will be done, Lord, not mine." Here too, the question is, "Do you mean it?" Can you learn to mean it? It is the phrase that reminds us God is in charge. I can pray for him to work miracles, but

whether or not he does, is up to him, and his will. And when I lay hands on many of you later, as I pray for God's Spirit to anoint you inside even as I am anointing you on the outside, I will only be asking that God's will be done in your body and soul ... that God will make you whole, whether now or in a few hours, whether through a miracle or a drug or a doctor's care ... or maybe your healing is waiting for you in God's kingdom. All I know, all I can do is this: I leave it up to God. And I trust he will not leave you where you are, but will bring you closer and closer to wholeness in whatever way he chooses, through miracle or mystery. That's what I expect of him. What do you expect?

Song: Make me new

music recorded by Henry Fiske, Jr.

*I'm tired and worn out from the journey I have travelled
Let down and disappointed by the way things have unraveled
So I bring my shattered dreams and a heart that's broke in pieces
To the healing love I know, can make me new ...
Make me new dear Lord, renew my heart and mind
Make me new dear Lord, help me leave the past behind
Pour your Spirit into me, break these chains and set me free
Make me new dear Lord, make me new
And now when I'm weak and my heart begins to stray
Your Spirit gently whispers, "In your life I'm here to stay"
So I bring my shattered dreams and a heart that's broke in pieces
To the healing love I know can make me whole
Make me new dear Lord, renew my heart and mind ...*

Song: Let the peace of God reign

music recorded by Hillsongs

*Father of life draw me closer, Lord, my heart is set on you;
Let me run the race of time, with your life enfolding mine,
And let the peace of God, let it reign.
O, Holy Spirit, you're my comfort, strengthen me, hold my head up high;
And I'll stand upon your truth, bringing glory unto you,
And let the peace of God, let it reign.
O Lord, I hunger for more of you, rise up within me let me know your truth;
O, Holy Spirit, saturate my soul, and let the life of God fill me now,
Let your healing pow'r bring life and make me whole,
And let the peace of God, let it reign.*