

Faith!

Maybe it is because movies like "The Exorcist" had such an effect on me, or maybe it is because I used to watch too many TV evangelists and faith healers as a child, or maybe it is because I grew up in a fundamentalist environment where healing involved smacking someone on the head and invoking the name of Jesus and demanding a healing. When I think of exorcisms and healings, I think of high drama and holy water and blessed oil and long prayers and laying on of hands, and all the rest that churchifies our prayers for wholeness and healing. But Jesus was not like that at all. Do you remember the gospel reading of two weeks ago? Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit by simply saying to the mouthy spirit, "shut up and get out of him." Last week, Jesus healed Simon's feverish and bed-ridden mother-in-law by taking her hand and lifting her up. He didn't even say a word.

And this week, too, there is a simplicity to the healings in the stories in our readings today –there is an expectation of something big, something more, something grand about to happen, followed by a matter-of-factness in the healings that seems to disappoint even those who are healed. In the first reading the haughty Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, a great man and a mighty warrior, is downright offended by the simplicity of Elisha's prescription for curing his leprosy. *I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!.*

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 was somehow a better river than the great rivers of Syria, his own country.

Naaman is like the man of faith in the old story that I know I have told you before. The guy is caught in a flood and goes up on the roof of his house. There 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.*

Perhaps, like Naaman, 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 might need to be like magic, full of special effects, before we'll pay any attention. But most of the miracles we experience 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 might be downright snobbish or have such high expectations that we miss the obvious – dismiss the holy in the midst of the ordinary.

Look for a moment at the cast of characters in the first reading. Oh, sure, there is the great man himself, Naaman, and also the kings of Aram and Israel, and, of course, Elisha, the great prophet. But 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 Naaman to seek out Elisha, that 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.

Naaman expected a major league looking miracle of healing because he was an important person. But here is the clue to perhaps the lesson of this story: there aren't special miracles for "important people." They don't heal differently from the poor, or plain, or simple people but are simply other brothers and sisters in pain and sorrow, and similarly capable of sharing the same joy in Christ. The role of the servants in bringing about this healing underscores this fact of the kingdom of God: The unimportant go first in the order of this kingdom, leading the way for the rest of us. There is a scene at the end of Flannery O'Connor's short story *Revelation* that illustrates that reality. Mrs. Turpin, the main character, has a vision of a great parade of people into heaven. To her great surprise – all the self-righteous, including Mrs. Turpin, who "had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right" march toward heaven at the end of a long, long line led by a massive crowd of those she had always dismissed as the least, the lost, and the last. The hierarchy of worldly privilege is gone, and blessings of God tumble abundantly over everyone. Everyone. Maybe we should put a sign outside on our church that reads: "You are not too bad to come in. You are not too good to stay out."

Yet the reluctance to claim the miracles continues in the Gospel reading from Mark, and includes even Jesus himself. Moved by pity to heal the leper who begs Jesus to heal him, Jesus seems shy about what he has done. *Don't say anything to anyone, just go see the priest so he can certify that you are clean* he warns the cleansed leper, but the man disobeys, and soon Jesus is on the run, hiding from the crowds. He draws back from the display of his power, even though the whole point of his miracles is to show people that the kingdom of God is near them.

Why would Jesus pull back from publicizing his work? Imagine today, he would have huge marketing department to publicize his deeds, probably a blog and a

twitter account, and perhaps a Super Pac to tout his accomplishments and perhaps attack the other faith healers that were working in Palestine. Why is he so shy about his healings? Is it because the people are not ready to experience the kingdom of God being that close to them? Did they need to live through the weakness and despair that would come at the end of Jesus' story on earth before they can be trusted with the fullness of his power?

Perhaps they need to know the darkness before they can handle that light. It might be true of us that would follow Jesus today. Would we stick around to hear the whole story of Jesus if healing miracles were a common occurrence? Might we not just pick up our miracle and go home?

Even those closest to Jesus sometimes resembled Naaman and his reaction to the simplicity of Elisha's prescription for healing. They had a hard time with the ordinariness of Jesus, with his humiliation at the hands of a powerful and corrupt authority. He was the Christ, the Messiah, they agreed in their best moments. But he ought to show his power more explicitly, they thought. He ought to show them who he was. "If you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross" his enemies taunted him, and his friends wondered why he didn't do just that.

But would "showing" them his power have made the difference in Jesus' ministry? Would that have kept him off the cross and written a different ending to the story of earthly life of Jesus? Perhaps, but I don't think so, for there is a distinct humanity to Jesus. The Jesus who healed people miraculously was also a person, and he died in seeming weakness. We claim a Jesus who is both God and human.

Our faith and our human history walk through time together, and we can see God at work in the way faith and history influence each other.

Positive outcomes to problems do not certify the power of God except to those who read the story of humankind by the light of their faith. Those who believe are already disposed to see God's power at work.

For the others, those who were alive when he walked the earth but who didn't claim the faith, Jesus' life must have looked like an abject failure. *Is that all? some must have asked. He seemed so promisingly powerful. Was all that just destroyed? I'm glad I wasn't foolish enough to believe. Think how embarrassed I'd be now.*

Meanwhile, the rowboats just keep on coming. If we choose, we can see the power of God because we claim it, because, in a sense, we decide to see God at work. That is faith. And if it is about anything, this sermon is about faith – it may be mere coincidence or something more – but the word this morning from my subscriptions monks at Brother Give us a Word is – faith!

Faith. Someone heals spontaneously, or survives a difficult surgery, or a couple works on reviving a broken relationship and succeeds, or a life is turned around from addiction, or a parent and child – estranged through adolescence – restore and rebuild a healthy relationship, in all of these things faith can see a miracle.

Someone dies on a cross and the world sees failure and turns away. Others, however, glimpsed the face of God and the possibility of eternal life. They realized that they have a say in what they will accept, what they will believe, and who they will follow. So do we!