

The hard part
Jubilee Mennonite Church
February 11, 2018

Purpose: To explore our inclinations of discomfort when we are shown grace.

Message: God meets in the opportunities of life offering grace more in the simple than the demands we take on ourselves.

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:-14 (I will read); Mark 1:40-45 (please read)

Synopsis: Most of the time we turn to God for magic. We spend time praying for exactly what we want for those who we love. Sometimes this connects us to what we are hoping for. Sometimes it does not. That leaves us with a hard question: what does it mean when what we expect from God fails to materialize. We expect that God works in magical ways—we get the right formula, pray the right prayers, be the right people and things happen for us accordingly, presto, change. Yet more often than not, this is not how it works. Rather God, Jesus defers the healing the big stuff of life and invites people into the mystery of life where God promises gracious presence far more than specific provision. How do we live life within the mystery of God's way of being as much as we do the magic of God's working?

5 Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram.

The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.
² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.

³ She said to her mistress,
"If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.

⁵ And the king of Aram said,
"Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.

⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read,

"When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said,

"Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?
Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king,

"Why have you torn your clothes?
Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.

¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying,
“Go, wash in the Jordan seven times,
and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying,

“I thought that for me he would surely come out,
and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God,
and would wave his hand over the spot,
and cure the leprosy!

¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus,
better than all the waters of Israel?
Could I not wash in them, and be clean?”
He turned and went away in a rage.

¹³ But his servants approached and said to him,
“Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult,
would you not have done it?

How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”

¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan,
according to the word of the man of God;
his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

There is just something about a good healing. No matter what the era, time or place, it is sure to draw a crowd. Because who doesn't want to experience that? Nearly everyone we know, including ourselves are in need of healing in one way or another. From physical maladies or mental illness. Within the crippling confines of grief. The memories that have a way of haunting. We know where healing comes from. We know where to look. We look to the God who is above us all, and seek wholeness. But we don't get to pick the method. Seldom do we get to steer the outcome of our prayers, or see the miraculous in our midst. We long for it, we desire it, we hope for it. Yet most often, we are left wondering how to explain what really can't—when things don't always go the way we hoped. Even when we do see healing and the seemingly miraculous, we are much more given to point to the circumstances and facilities that made it possible then to point back to the prime actor behind the scenes—the God of the Universe.

Yet, as we witness the scriptures, they are full of the miraculous. The text we read from Mark 1 is one of a whole series of healings that Jesus accomplishes with barely batting an eye. It is getting such that he has to stay outside of town just to get some peace. But they just keep coming. In our sermon text, we have an Old Testament example with Elisha offering a cure for Naaman who was seeking wholeness. There is a whole lot of power and politics going on here, but at the heart of it all we are given a story where the person in power sets out to tackle the problem they had in the way they knew best; by exercising their power, privilege and wealth to get their way. Sickness, with few exceptions, is an equal opportunity tormentor. When it is our turn, we go to the best hospitals, the best methods and the best doctors to make things right. I will say that I am about as skeptical as the next North American guy when it comes to faith healing, expect to say that I do believe it exists, despite not being my gifting. But it is hard for me to forget the healing I witnessed the couple of times I spent time with the church in Colombia. People offered and received healing of all sorts freely, and fully. When people don't have the resources, perhaps their way is a bit clearer toward true healing and the real work of faith then we who are burdened with greater worldly options. No matter where you come from on this side of the gospels, though, it is hard to read these stories without noting on some level their rarity in daily life. It can be hard to read of the miracles of the bible that come so seemingly easily and not feel like you are just being offered that which you just can't have.

“The problem with miracles,” Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by.”

So we theorize, theologize, and spiritualize: “God is using this sickness to build your character.” “God’s preparing you for something great.” “Satan is testing you — stay strong!” “You need to have more faith.” “Maybe there’s some secret sin in your life — have you tried confession?” “You should have so-and-so pray for you; he/she seems to have a direct line to God.” “God’s timing is different from ours — just be patient.” “Have you tried fasting?” And that is if—and it’s a big if here—we even retain the notion the God is still in the miracle business what so ever.

Besides being insensitive and hurtful, these claims and admonitions encourage us to assume that health, wholeness, and comfort are the norms we should expect to experience in this life. Everything else by this accounting — physical pain, emotional pain, chronic illness, untimely death — is an aberration easily controlled as a function of faithfulness. No wonder people flock to churches that promise prosperity, healing, and happiness Sunday after Sunday — why not grab hold of the magic if it’s out there to claim? Why not demand glitter and spectacle? ⁱ We want the magic of Jesus where the right words, the right symbols, the right sayings make everything come right in the end. Instead we get the mystery of Jesus who goes around healing people and telling them to keep their mouth shut about it, lest the secret spread. We are a lot like Naaman; we come convinced that there is the right thing to do, the right thing to say, and the right person to say the right words, and God will act on our behalf. Yet we have Jesus blatantly hiding what he can do. Elisha doesn’t even deal directly with Naaman to set him right—he just sends an aid and calls it good enough. We may want the magic ones of the bible, but rarely do they arrive in the self-promoting guise we often look for them in.

Most of the time, I think we have a lot more in common with Naaman in this story than anyone else. We come seeking aid, healing, and hope and we are willing to do just about

anything to get it. Naaman was no one to be messed with. A general in a regional super power, he came with the backing of his king, his position, his expectations. It is profoundly bad news when he shows up looking for help from where he expects it—the King who has no better answers than anyone else. When Elisha offers to take the case, Naaman comes with all his power in tact—his horses, his chariots, all his people, his wealth (the sums being many years wages for most workers). He is still operating within the world of power, and he expects a response within that same realm. He cannot imagine anything outside of that world. Doctors are supposed to call in prescriptions or perform surgery to make us better. Prophets are supposed to say some prayers or wave their hands to heal sick people. When Elisha does none of that, Naaman is furious. He assumes the prophet is just trying to make him look silly. Go was in the muddy, good for nothing Jordan—there is no way. It takes Naaman’s servants to put it all in context for him. Listen, Boss--perhaps we are making this just a little too hard. Perhaps we are bringing the wrong expectations to the work of healing here. Perhaps there is something else going on in our midst.

The purpose of the scriptures, I think, is not so much to spell out the ways and means of the world as it is, prescribing the ways and means to procure the magic of God in our daily lives. There is too much going on for that, too many layers, too much nuance. Have you ever wondered about all the folks Jesus didn’t heal, that Elisha failed to see? Sometimes I wish that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had included a few less dramatic stories in their books, too. Perhaps did Jesus ever visit a sick house only to offer some comfort, a listening ear, and some chicken soup in a yogurt container? Did he ever tell a chronically ill child, “I can’t take away your pain, but I love you, and I’ll try my best to help you bear it?” Did he ever encounter an unclean spirit he didn’t or couldn’t cast out? We don’t have those stories. We do have these stories of healing, and I think that they are stories we need precisely because they are so far beyond our normal way of experiencing the world. They invite us to imagine the a different world might be possible. They help us with the difficult work of expanding our horizons beyond what is normal—a world of suffering—to a world where God’s working is on full display for all to see. To be clear, God is at work in our midst. Perhaps by illustrating the large strokes of the God story with power and might it encourages us to look for the finer brush work in our own lives. Perhaps the point here is less the magic of big deeds and big words (the stuff that magicians use to distract the viewer

from the ordinary stuff that is really going on) and more the mystery of God with us even where we least expect, even where we are not expecting to see God at work, like the muddy waters of a sometimes river, like the wildernesses of our lives. Like the places where we wonder where God may have forgotten us. By all means we need the miracles; but we should not be so blinded by the extraordinary to forget that God with us remains present in the mysterious ways of life.

The challenge here is to imagine a world where God with us is not reduced to the all or nothing, go big or go home images we have of the world. We have the miracles in the world to speak to the moments where we seek God's presence. We need to know that God works. Yet, we are invited into the ways that God acts, miraculous or not. We are invited into the mystery of a kingdom of heaven already here, yet seemingly so far away. These stories invite us into this both-and, trusting God in our midst in all things.

May we be given the strength to do the hardest thing of all—looking for God at work, in the midst of the miracles of every shape, size, and colour, calling them out for all to see to the Glory of God. Amen.

ⁱ Drawn from Debie Thomas *Mystery, Not Magic* <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1640-mystery-not-magic>