

SERMON for Sunday, February 5, 2006
Isaiah 40: 21-31, Mark 1:29-39

Rev. Shirley R. Funk
Lake Edge Lutheran Church
Madison, Wisconsin

The Fainting Couch

In these days of late winter, when on many days the sky is gray and even Jimmy the Groundhog doesn't see his shadow, when the world is still war-torn and AIDS is making orphans out of millions of African children, we are hungry and hurting, we are impatient and we are frustrated. In these dark days of a seemingly endless array of disease and illness, we are in need of healing. In a fragmented world that seems to be cracking apart from mistrust and suspicion and even hatred and intentional cruelty, we are in need of wholeness. And when we are lost, we need to be found. No matter how optimistic we are, and some of us do tend to see the glass as half-full rather than half-empty and are bestowed with natures that are generally cheerful, we can easily be overwhelmed by the needs within and around us. And we look for antidotes.

One place to look for that antidote is in the gospel lesson for today, from the gospel of Mark, where we read about Jesus venturing forth on a healing mission. Simon's mother-in-law was one of the first to be so healed: when Jesus touched her with an outstretched hand, she was cured of her fever. The next scene described involves a lot of townspeople, a time when many were cured of whatever ailed them. The third and final scene of our gospel story is when Jesus, after a brief period of respite and refreshment and prayer, travels further afield to continue his ministry. In Jesus we see a simple solution in these simple acts described in these simple words. Jesus heals.

We want a Jesus that simply heals, and search him out. We read the Bible looking to find the answers we want and sometimes don't read the text and subtext and context, the whole story of the people of God with its twists and turns, its political and cultural and social setting, the changes that translations and interpretations have made. We come for a spiritual fill-up, to get us through and over the rough places, and fall into the trap of our religious experience as only mattering to us. We focus on our relationship with Jesus – which is of course critically important to faith – yet often to the exclusion of the kingdom of God Jesus came to proclaim. There is great appeal to the Christianity we see displayed on TV, the evangelists whose marketers always have an offer to make to send books or tapes or DVD's in exchange for a gift. Hordes of people, supposedly made better in an instant. The evangelistic healers promise everything, yet are able to give only momentary hope. I'm sure many of us have been tempted and almost lured in not necessarily by the Christian hype but by other kinds of simple promises of cures and comforts. Perhaps it is enough, to hold out hope for a moment or two. When we read of Jesus going about town, causing what we have come to call miracles, we are wont to tag along, clamoring, "Me, too, Jesus, me, too!" But if we only see the gospel as a healing incident, or a series of healing incidents, then we haven't really seen Jesus. Jesus is bigger, greater, mightier.

In this one particular incident, when Jesus touches Simon's mother-in-law, is the sign of the kingdom of God on earth, God's reign breaking into our time, into our world. God touches, and the world will never be the same again. More than just a

single body or a single limb, a particular disease or a spot of skin, the healing points to the wholeness of creation which God promises.

Episcopal priest Mary Moore Roberson shares this week her reflections on this gospel, and tells of church member named Barbara, whose house mortgage had been foreclosed, and who, with her 10-year-old son, became homeless for a time. After a while they moved to rundown public housing. Barbara kept appearing at the church office, always in need, for school shoes, for gas, for car insurance, for Christmas. Like the good-hearted people they were, the church staff kept doling out monetary Band-Aids, hoping to fix yet another lesion. They almost hated to hear the receptionist's voice, announcing "Barbara's here." Until one of the church staff said, "Let's stop messing around and really help her. It's going to take a lot of money...[some people will] say we're crazy." And so they took the challenge, helping Barbara enroll in nursing school, supplied her with a decent and furnished apartment while she completed her education, loaned her a car to drive, took care of her tuition and day-to-day expenses. Barbara finally climbed out of her hole despair. And when she was close to graduation, asked to appear before the church leaders, and told the story of the ebbing away of her life and the miracle of her new life. She told of her life's purpose, saying, "Thank you for helping me when I could not help myself. Because of you, I am going to be able to help others. I want you to know this. Every single time I touch a person for healing, this parish will touch that person with me. You will be right there." When Jesus touches, the person touched is not the only person touched. And when we touch in the name of Jesus, reaching out to the needs of our community, we become a part of this healing chain. We carry the loving, restorative, power of Christ beyond our borders and spread healing, as one person put it, to "amazing dimensions". Following Christ, we become Christ to each other. And I think for most of the time, for most of us, that is enough of a commitment, enough of a challenge.

But our reading of the words of the prophet Isaiah that is our first lesson this morning, read alongside the words of the gospel, make for a broader picture, and challenge us further. These are words often read at the time of a funeral, "Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youth will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." This is the context those words: the people of Israel have been exiled and are in Babylonian captivity. They are dispirited, they are away from all that is familiar and gives them strength, their comfortable existence has been upset, the foundations of their society and their families have been shaken. In our time we know that political refugees, refugees from natural disasters, refugees from the strictures of poverty, have been forced away from all they know. In our time we know how events of disease and war and a shaky economy are unsettling, even in modest proportions. The people of Israel fervently hoped for rescue, just as we fervently hope. They must have cried to God, "How long, O Lord, how long?" as we cry, "Me, too, Jesus, touch me too." What answer do we get? The prophet speaks not merely to individuals, but to a whole people, the people of Israel living in exile, to all people living separated from God. The future of this people lies in the hope not only that individuals will be restored and comforted and strengthened, but that a defeated and hopeless nation will be saved. When? We don't know, nor does God promise a particular time and place. This is so large we can hardly get our minds around it.

So have we the big picture, the patience, the perspective? S. Parkes Cadman, a congregational minister of the late nineteenth century, commented on our desire for immediate solutions to our particular afflictions: "The kingdom of God will not come in a day; it will not be left with the morning milk." A funny little comment, but as with many brief comments, a whole grain of truth. Our impatience for God's presence often outweighs our trust in God's presence, and we think that we have been left alone without a companion, that we have been abandoned to rely on our own strength, or to succumb to our own weakness. Not so, not so.

There is a curious piece of furniture from the Victorian era, during the latter part of the eighteenth century, that is dubbed a "fainting couch", a couch with a slanted back and one arm, a rather firm cushion. Women's sensibilities were easily offended during those days, or supposedly so, and women were characterized as 'delicate'. However, the delicacy and susceptibility to fainting more likely came from corsets, laced so tightly that breath was literally taken away. With a fainting couch at the ready, a place to find comfort and support was nearby. Well, we don't need a fainting couch. Every one of us, young and old, rich and poor, will have the breath knocked out of us at one time or another, and many times over. And God is the one who will give power and strength and courage to us when we are fainting, when our breath is taken away by disease and trouble, by despair and sadness.

One further aspect of the gospel seems important for our understanding this morning. After healings had taken place, Jesus went out to pray alone, to seek guidance for the next step in his ministry. The disciples sought him out, wanting to bring him back into town because, as they said, "Everyone is searching for you." But Jesus said, "Let's go on to the neighboring town, so that I may proclaim the message there also." And to that, 1920's preach Hal Luccock commented, "He came not be a town doctor but to be the world's Redeemer." And so Jesus went on, to go throughout Galilee to spread the news of God's healing kingdom for all the faint and weary. And the touch of Jesus reverberates throughout creation, then and now.

The words of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi guides us:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury pardon.

Where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,

To be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.