

# BACK TO LIFE

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**1 KINGS 17:17-24; LUKE 7:11-17**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**JUNE 9, 2013/3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

After last week's sermon, I was talking with someone about the many difficult things that I *didn't* address during the sermon.

You'll recall that we heard about another healing last week—Jesus' healing of the Roman centurion's slave, and about how the centurion's faith *surprised* Jesus.

I'm sure some questions occurred to at least a few of you.

- If one of the main things God is interested in is *faith*, and if God has promised that all nations will one day come to him, how could he be surprised to discover faith in a foreigner?
- Come to think of it, how can God be "surprised" at *anything*?
- Doesn't God *know* everything already? Past, present, future...

Which might lead to questions like...

- Was it just the "human" part of Jesus that was surprised?
- How do we know when Jesus is being God and when he is being human?

Which might lead to all kinds of questions about the nature of the Trinity and the Incarnation and probably a few other impenetrable mysteries that I wasn't too keen on opening up in a twenty-minute sermon 😊.

That's one of the nice things about being "on the clock"—you can just avoid all kinds of massive questions by saying, "I'd love to explain some of these deep, vexing issues, but we just don't have time for that today..." 😊.

Well, today's texts don't really give us the luxury of leaving some of the big questions aside.

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We have two stories of healing separated by centuries.

There are many things that we could talk about when it comes to these two stories.

We could talk about the *power* of God in bringing dead people back to life.

... about the *kindness* and the *compassion* of God in responding to human grief and suffering.

We could talk about how scholars think that Luke has crafted his narrative of the healing of the widow's son to specifically trigger in his readers' minds the story of Elijah's healing of another widow's son in 1 Kings.

... about how Luke means for us to make connections between the prophet Elijah and Jesus

...about the statement Luke is making about Jesus' identity as the new Elijah, the new prophet to signal God's presence and action among and for his people.

We could talk about how Jesus goes *beyond* Elijah in touching the casket (thus violating Jewish religious norms) and in simply *speaking* the words of healing (instead of prostrating himself on the body, as Elijah did)...

... about how *speaking* life into being would have echoed all the way back to Genesis 1, when God spoke and a world came into being.

We could talk about the social implications of these healing stories...

... about how in both Elijah's and Jesus' day, widows would have been in a very desperate economic situation with the death of a son.

...about how sons represented security, protection, belonging, and connection in the community.

... about how these two healings weren't just about Elijah Jesus doing a nice thing for two women who were heartbroken at the passing of a loved one (although it certainly *was* that); it was also about saving the lives of the women!

We could talk about any of these things and more.

But I suspect that when most of us hear or read stories of healing in the Bible, our instinct is to think in much more personal terms.

Stories of healing speak to us because *we all know what it is to desperately want healing*, whether for ourselves or for someone close to us.

Many people here have watched those they care about die slow, wasting deaths, despite thousands of prayers for healing or deliverance unto death.

Some have dealt or are dealing with long-term afflictions.

(See story on chronic pain in the most recent *Canadian Mennonite*.)

Some have prayed very specifically for healing in the past and have not received it.

We live in a world where, to quote a woman who came into my office one day told me, “Everything seems to be broken.”

In this world, we read stories like the ones in our texts today and while we celebrate God’s power and goodness in wrenching life from the jaws of death...

... we wonder, **why doesn’t God do this more often?**

I know I do.

The response to this question is quite simple: I don’t know.

(We will now have our closing hymn 😊.)

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Three stories.

In my first year in Nanaimo, one of the prominent leaders in our church got very ill with a mysterious disease that was wreaking havoc with his immune system.

He was a good man—very involved in the community, very committed to working to alleviate poverty in the city, very involved in working with children facing challenges with physical and mental disabilities.

I went to visit him in the hospital. He was quarantined in a special chamber. I couldn’t even see him without wearing a full body suit with gloves on. He was in severe pain. There was a genuine risk that he might not make it.

We talked. And then I prayed for him. I placed my gloved hand on his and we very simply asked that God would heal his body.

A while later, he was fine.

For a long time thereafter, he would tell anyone who would listen that my prayer had healed him. He still says this whenever I see him on our travels in BC.

Another time, I got a desperate phone call from a high school support worker in our church. One of the students she had worked with had tried to kill himself and she was wondering if I could come and talk to him.

I went into the hotel room and saw two very nervous teenagers—the boy, with slash marks and bandages on his wrists, and his girlfriend. Neither one would make eye contact with me, neither one would say very much. I learned from his worker that he had been severely abused and mistreated by his mom’s boyfriend for months on end.

I had no idea what to do, so I simply asked if I could pray for him. I prayed that he would know that he was loved and that God would give him a strong sense that he had value and worth.

I left the room having no idea if my visit would make any difference.

A few weeks later, the worker called me to let me know that the boy was still facing many challenges, but that he was back in school and that he seemed to be in a much better place.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to go and pray for healing for a man in our community who was suffering from dementia and the many effects of a lifetime of poverty, racism, and substance abuse.

His story was almost too sad to bear. I prayed for healing, for deliverance, for a peace and for strength.

As far as I know, nothing has changed. As far as I know, this poor, tired, defeated man still walks around in a fog of pain and confusion.

Three stories.

One where the healing “worked,” one where we’re not really sure, and one where it didn’t.

It’s a mixed bag, kind of like life. Even in Jesus’ day, it seems reasonable to assume that not everyone was healed. Even Jesus didn’t heal *everyone* that crossed his path.

We only hear—or at least *focus on*—the victory stories. The triumphant stories.

And then we try to make sense of these stories in a life that doesn’t always look or feel very victorious or triumphant.

What do we do with these stories of healing?

Are stories of healing about getting goodies from God? Or do they point to a deeper reality?

I want to suggest that stories of healing can do at least two things.

First, and perhaps more ironically, they ought to remind us that the healing we long for is always a future hope.

The two boys that were healed in our texts today, eventually died.

Each person in the three stories from my experience that I shared earlier will die.

Each person in this room will die.

**All healings in this life are temporary reprieves. All healings in this life take place within the context of a reality where suffering is normal.**

*In this context, we as followers of Jesus need to learn how to suffer well.*

How should we suffer? How should we view it?

I don't know many people who actually desire or welcome pain but I think we intuitively sense that following Jesus somehow changes how we look at (or ought to look at) suffering even if we aren't always very good at articulating how.

I recently read a book by William Willimon called *Why Jesus?*. In a chapter about pastoral care, he tells the story of a couple in his church who received the news that their brand new baby boy had been born with Down's Syndrome and a respiratory condition that would make life complicated and difficult for both the child and his parents.

The doctor's recommendation was to "let nature take its course"—in other words, to let the boy die. There was simply too much pain on the horizon.

Suffering, as the doctor understood it, was simply to be avoided at all costs. It was an unqualified negative.

The parents' reaction was different. They saw suffering as something to learn and grow through together as a family. They didn't say that God had orchestrated the suffering of their son, but they were convinced that God could either heal him or bring something good out of it—both for the family and for the baby.

The doctor turned to Willimon, who was the couple's pastor at the time, and pleaded with him to "talk some reason into the couple." Here's what Willimon has to say:

*For me, it was a vivid depiction of the way in which the church, at its best, is in the business of teaching a different language from that of the world. The church, through its stories, worship, and life together, teaches a different language whereby words like "suffering," words that are unredeemably negative in our society, change their substance. Here was a couple who had listened to a peculiar story, namely the life and death of Jesus Christ, in which suffering could be reasonably redemptive.*

It strikes me that this teaching and embodying of a "different language" is what the church ought to be about.

We do not change the nature or experience of suffering. We do not turn it into something it is not. Suffering doesn't magically become good because Jesus suffered.

We do not screw up our wills and try to pray or talk ourselves into liking or desiring it in some kind of a weird misguided martyr complex.

We don't explain away miracles and healing in order to protect ourselves or deal with the problems that come from what we can't understand.

*What we do, instead, is allow our experience of the pain of the world to find its place in the story narrated by Scripture.*

We do not accept the "language" of a secular narrative of suffering which sees it primarily as something to either ignore, pretend doesn't exist, or flee from.

Rather, we look at it squarely and resolutely, acknowledging its reality along with what it does to us and those we love, we ask for relief, and we do our best to bring whatever good we can out of it.

We do not give in to despair and resignation because we know that there is more of the story to come.

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So, we can reimagine suffering.

***But we can also refuse to stop asking, stop begging, stop pleading with God for healing.***

Like the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8.

We never stop praying for healing.

There are many things we don't know.

We don't know how prayer works in concert with God's plans for the future. We don't know why God doesn't heal more consistently or predictably. We don't know why God allows suffering at all.

We don't know many things. But we keep on asking, because we believe that that God we see in Jesus Christ, the God that we see in the story of Elijah, is a God who is moved by compassion, a God who loves us, and a God who can be trusted—even with what we don't know and can't understand.

Perhaps especially with what we don't know and can't understand.

We keep asking because we believe that even though we can't always make sense of the puzzle, the overall shape of life is one that is defined by two things:

- the God who suffers
- the God who promises life

Like this picture that has been up on the wall throughout the sermon. The edges are kind of rough and undefined, the pieces of the puzzle don't always seem to go together, but the overall shape of the picture is cross-shaped.

The reality of suffering and the promise of life. We must never separate these two. This is the shape of life in the kingdom that is coming.

So, we keep asking and we keep working.

Many of you spent a lot of time and a great deal of effort at the MCC Sale this past weekend. Why?

We're not *solving* global problems. We're not eradicating poverty or injustice. We're not converting the whole world to the Gospel of Peace.

But we are doing *something*. We are bearing witness that life and newness and hope are deeper and stronger than death and "the way the world is" and resignation.

Our actions are speaking what we believe to be true about our world.

We don't see healing or relief from suffering as often as we would like. What do we do? Complain? Sure. Lament? Certainly. Express our confusion and hope for freedom from pain? Without doubt.

But we also simply participate in the newness that we are convinced is coming in God's future.

Even if we wish it would come more quickly. *Especially* because we wish it would come more quickly.

We pray and we beg and we work because we are convinced that whatever our Bibles do *not* tell us about the mysteries of prayer and healing and suffering and salvation, they do tell us that God is a God of life, and not death.

And that this God is always summoning us back to life.

Sometimes spectacularly. More often in ordinary events of every day life.

We are always being called back to life.

Thanks be to God.