

Isaiah 40:28-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Mark 1:29-39

Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸ He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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Isaiah 40:28-31; Mark 1:29-39

Pandemic Wall to Pandemic Well

Pandemic Wall

I read an article this week about the “pandemic wall” and then I ran smack into it. Cade just finished January term at Randolph Macon. This time last year, we were welcoming him back from his trip to Japan, and starting to hear vaguely about this new virus that was popping up in China. Chuck traveled for work through San Antonio just as they were investigating their first case there, right before just about everything came to an unreal pause last March. It seems ages ago. We did what we had to do. We changed how we do things. We accepted or at least came to live with the “new normal,” and now we continue to listen to the advice of experts and concern ourselves with best practices to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. With the vaccine, some aspects of our lives may go back to the way they were. Other things will never be the same, not in our lifetimes. It’s almost been a year now of uncertainty, unrest, and isolation. I completely understand the feeling of being “over it.” I want it to just end.

Thursday night, I reached an impasse. I was jarred awake by the kind of anxiety that ruins sleep and presses in on all sides. The fog wouldn’t clear. The pain refused to be stuffed down or smoothed over another time. I hit the wall, and the only thing I could do was experience that truth in that moment. So, when Mark tells us that those who were sick or feeling demon-possessed were flocking to Jesus, I get it. And as evening falls, I can understand why it seemed as though the whole city was gathered at his door.

I can see that door in my mind. News traveled fast about Simon’s Mother-in-Law. Evening has come. The whole city is pressing against Jesus, for healing, for hope, for transformation. They heard he had the answers to their pain. The image is both comforting and frightening. I know that Jesus welcomed and still welcomes those who are sick or in distress, but so do cult leaders and people who have cures to sell. Those who are hurting badly enough or who are scared enough will take any solutions that come their way. It puts them in the place of vulnerability to either be strengthened and renewed, or to be swindled by the snake oil salesmen and false prophets of the day.

Jesus stayed by that door healing sicknesses, listening to stories, silencing demons, presumably for a significant amount of time. How long does it take to heal a whole city? How much energy did he need for that? I think of the health care workers who collapse at the end of a shift, the teachers who take time to truly listen to how their students are doing, the service industry workers who get paid nearly nothing – but reap the increasing anxiety of their customers. Who needs help? Who needs assurance? Who needs Jesus? Well, I certainly do. I dare say that we all do.

Pandemic Fine

You see, I had been living under another of the pandemic conditions when I hit that wall. I was operating as though I was pandemic “fine.” You know how people always ask that question, “How are you doing?” And the answer that isn’t usually a real answer is, “Fine.” I’m fine, the kids are fine, my husband is fine. We’re all fine. And the reality is that there are a lot of things about my life that fit into the category of “fine.” Chuck and I didn’t lose our jobs. We have the flexibility to work from home or from our offices. We have strengthened our connections as a family and with a few friends who are included in our “in home” bubble, and we have the phones and computers and internet service that make it plausible to continue to connect through work and friendship ties. Our church is also fine, maintaining its commitments in an environment we couldn’t have predicted under any previous strategic plan. My complaints seem small in the larger world right now. I know there’s much to be done in the way of justice, and peace, and economic fairness – but for the world I inhabit in the day to day – It’s. All. Just. Fine.

This logic can work in the short term. It’s a “count your blessings” practice. It’s positive thinking. It’s looking for rainbows and unicorns when the world is falling apart. It is Simon’s Mother-in-Law being cured of her fever to make snacks for all the friends he brought over while she was sick. Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad Jesus chose to heal her, but when the gospel author goes directly to “and she got up and served them,” I’m like... hold on a minute. Wait, what? She got up from her fever-bed to undertake the domestic responsibilities that “I-don’t-know-who” picked up in her absence. Oh, she was “fine” – probably. Or at least that’s my reading on how she is portrayed in this story.

Neither hitting the pandemic wall, nor being pandemic “fine” will satisfy our human needs for being truly well. One turns us toward grief and anger, the other toward complacency. I find it comforting to look at what Jesus did the day AFTER he did all that healing.

Pandemic Well

Early in the morning, Jesus gets up before everyone else has stirred and heads out by himself, to a deserted place, to pray. Oh, I know this feeling too. Even as crowded music venues and sitting in a cozy restaurant became scenes in a rear-view mirror, oddly my need for solitude hasn’t changed. Especially after a day of crowds who needed his help, I can certainly understand his desire for alone time. Jesus left – without telling anyone where he was going. *Sigh*. The healer also needs healing.

We need to remember this and be gentle with ourselves in this time when exhaustion and depletion seem to be the norm. Yes – scream or cry when you hit the wall. Yes – look for the silver lining and remember to count your blessings when you are feeling fine. But there is more to life, so much more. And Jesus knew it.

Jesus healed. He cast out demons. Did the illnesses return? Are there demons still among us? His evening spent at the door until every last person got what they needed was not a forever and ever solution. He showed them a glimpse of what it means to be whole, to be saved, to be well. He healed the people of Capernaum, and the next day, he told his disciples that they were going on

tour. They would be taking this message to various towns and seaside communities in and around Galilee.

So, what was Jesus giving folks exactly if it wasn't a permanent cure? He was showing them the love of the everlasting God, the depths of compassion possible from the Creator of the ends of the earth. His energy was fueled by God's energy – like harnessing the power of the sun. Though Jesus shows his human side, the magnitude of his willingness to pour himself out over and over again is a sign that he drinks deeply himself from the living water that God provides. It makes me curious as to what his times of prayer were like. Did he cry out and lament the wounds he saw in others? Did he stop to let God comfort him and fill him up? Maybe some strange combination of tears and gratitude – but whatever it was, he came back with more energy, more peace, and ready to preach and teach and heal some more.

It reminds me that spiritual well-being is something even greater than just our physical or mental health. Spiritual wholeness is being able to say “All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.” It is being able to sing, “It is well with my soul.” These spiritual words of comfort and blessing were not born out of everything being OK and having a comfortable lifestyle. Rather, these words of mystic Julian of Norwich and hymn lyrics of Horatio Spafford are poetic affirmations that even when there's a crowd of hurting people pressing at the door of God's Holy Kingdom demanding attention, Christ continues to offer us a fountain of goodness, of healing, of hope. Julian offered her spiritual counsel during the black plague. Spafford in particular was no stranger to tragedy. His son died of pneumonia, his business was lost in the great Chicago fire, and four of his daughters perished in an ocean liner wreck. And yet, he wrote “It is Well with my Soul” on his own journey across the ocean to support his grieving wife who alone survived the shipwreck.

To be pandemic well – not against the pandemic wall, and not pasting on the face of pandemic fine, is to put our trust in God during uncertain times. Those who trust in God, Isaiah tells us, will be renewed in their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary. They will walk and not faint. Even if nothing else is well, they will be well. Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God. God does not grow weary. God's understanding is unsearchable, or in the phrasing I like best, God is not unknowable but is rather infinitely knowable. There's always more. In pandemic times, in changing religious and political landscapes, in opening ourselves up to new ways of knowing, we encounter God, and God's desire for us is always wholeness, salvation, that all will be well – in our souls. Amen.