

Jesus Heals

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[0 : 00] Morning, everyone. My thanks to Tommy, to you, Dan, Lisa, Deborah, for having me.

My thanks to all of you for letting me join you. I realized this morning that this is the first time in over a year that I've actually been in an in-person service. So it's really great, actually. It feels very special.

And I've been thinking a lot about what it is that I get to do here, what I get to experience here when gathered with people in person that you can't do on Zoom.

And so I'm very excited to be here this morning. For our passage this morning, I think it's important to start with the big picture. So for those of you who attended the Easter vigil service of last weekend here or at another church, that service highlights God's loving pursuit of us over and over again.

The readings from Genesis and Exodus remind us of God's great acts of creation and recreation, that God makes all things new, even when sin and the forces of evil do their worst.

[1 : 14] The readings from Ezekiel remind us that God's salvation is so beyond our imagination that even what is dead beyond dead can be made alive.

We can be reborn and given new hearts. The readings from Isaiah and Zephaniah remind us that God's intention to dwell closely and intimately with his people, as at the beginning in the garden, that with the people he loves, created, and redeemed, will not be thwarted.

The reading from Genesis about Abraham going to sacrifice his son points to God's son dying for us. All things made through Jesus will be made new through Jesus.

And so when Jesus came onto the scene and began his ministry, he came into this long history of deep and powerful experiences with God, experiences that had created clear expectations of salvation and deliverance among the people of Israel.

And the world Jesus came into was one where his country was occupied by foreign invaders. It was a world of food insecurity, of violence, heavy taxation, and of rigid class layers.

[2 : 38] Oppression and injustice worked in lots of different directions. And it made the people groan. And the whole nation waited eagerly for the long-awaited Messiah.

Jesus' whole ministry was everything everyone dreamed of, longed for, and hoped for, but nothing what so many expected.

Jesus was a king coming to bring a new creation, a renewing of all things. Wherever the king was, the kingdom came too. Everything, everything Jesus said and did had transformative impact.

The kingdom came in direct and unflinching conflict with the kingdom of darkness, evident in the forgiveness of sin, the healing of people, the raising of the dead, and the driving out of demons.

The kingdom came in power against darkness, but came in gentleness for us, setting us free and restoring us to close relationship to God again.

[3 : 45] God's shepherd was stopping at nothing until every last sheep was back in his arms. Our passage this morning slows down the speed of this narrative and zooms in on one moment in the ministry of Jesus.

This moment is one of a few moments that Mark shares in the first part of his gospel to show that Jesus is bringing the kingdom on earth and in real time.

Jesus calls his first disciples. He heals a man with an unclean spirit right in the middle of a church service. He heals Peter's mother-in-law, then heals the rest of the city's worth of people who are sick or oppressed by the demonic.

And then after healing the man with leprosy, he goes on to forgive the sin of a man with paralysis and heals him so he can walk home. The kingdom is arrived.

So I want to look at a few things in this particular moment that Jesus has with the man with leprosy. In particular, I want to look at the man, I want to look at what we can learn about Jesus, and I want to look at the healing that the man received.

[4 : 59] So I want to start with a story. I realized as I was writing this, this is over 20 years ago, which I can't believe. But over 20 years ago, my wife and I lived and worked in Nepal, and we were on one of these treacherous bus rides from Pohra, where we live, to the capital, Kathmandu.

And we stopped at a rest stop where everyone was to get off and buy refreshments and use this ferocious bathroom. And we bought our refreshments, and we turned around, and there was this young guy standing in front of us with a very advanced case of leprosy.

I'd never seen this before in my life. I didn't know much about leprosy. I didn't know it was called Hansen's disease. I didn't know anything about how it was transmitted. But he was standing there, and it was very difficult for me to look at him.

He was very, very disfigured. I'd never seen anything like it. And he kept turning and spitting, which freaked me out every time, because I thought, I'm going to get leprosy. I'm going to get leprosy. Of course, you can't get leprosy like that. But I didn't know this. It was an overwhelming experience. What I did know, and I knew enough about his status as a person with leprosy in Nepal, that he was feared, that he was an outcast, rejected by his family and his community, pitied by some, and by others assumed to be under some kind of divine judgment.

[6 : 27] In the Nepali context, it would have been bad karma, payback for something he did in a past life. So some would have thought he deserved this. But it wasn't just his physical deformity that struck me.

It was that he carried about him the sense of, I know what I am. I know I am hideous. I know I am this thing. And I know how you feel about me, just looking at me.

Unfortunately, I felt it was hard. And when I read this passage, I realized that this would have been the same for the man with leprosy that Jesus encountered.

And in addition to all the unsightliness of the effects of the disease on him, the law, in particular Leviticus 13, required a person with leprosy to let their hair hang loose and not cover their head, and to cover over any facial hair as signs of mourning.

And they were, on top of it all, whenever they came close to other people, call out, unclean, unclean, to announce that they were coming and they were unclean so that people would be aware.

[7 : 38] They were to wear these Old Testament signs of mourning because they were considered ritually dead. That is, cut off from the life and practice of Israel's worship.

And, in effect, cut off from God. And they had to keep calling out this stigmatizing label every time they came close to other people.

People with leprosy had, by law, to live away from others outside of towns and villages. They couldn't work and they were dependent on the charity of others. There was a great deal of shame with leprosy, which went way deeper than I've done something wrong to a sense of I am inherently wrong.

There is something wrong with me. That's what shame says. So the man who came to Jesus with his disease and all the woundings of rejection, shame, and isolation came with that and every sense that he was cut off from God in an irreparable way.

The man comes on his knees and he implores Jesus to help. But I want you to notice what he says. He says, If you will, you can make me clean.

[8 : 55] The man knew that Jesus had the power. He had the ability to heal him, to take away his disease no matter how badly it had eaten into his body.

But he wasn't sure that Jesus was willing. If Jesus is the man of God that everybody says he is, then surely he would not want to do something like this for a leper, someone who is unclean.

The man had faith that Jesus could, but not that Jesus would. And yet, he came with whatever faith he did have and he came with desperation. The next thing we read in this passage is things that Mark tells us about Jesus and his response.

And we learn a lot about what Jesus is like. And it's worth focusing on three particular things. What Jesus felt, what he did, and then what he said. So what did Jesus feel?

It's the first thing that Mark describes. Compassion. The ESV uses the word pity. Jesus' response to the man with leprosy in front of him with all his disease is a visceral, heart-level, overwhelming, emotional love.

[10:09] That's what compassion is. We should hang on to this because this is how Jesus feels every time for every one of us. Jesus' actions.

The next thing Mark describes. Jesus does the unimaginable. He crosses the social distance requirement, maybe pun intended, and he touches him.

His disciples, like I freaked out, would have entirely freaked out. Jesus was doing the unconscionable. And according to the law, anyone who touched someone unclean became themselves unclean.

But perfect love and perfect holiness are one and the same. And when the Son of God touches someone unclean, the Son of God doesn't become unclean, but his touch, the very touch of Jesus, drives out uncleanness.

Jesus. And then Jesus' words with his hands on the man. From that place of overwhelming love, Jesus speaks and says, I will be clean.

[11:17] These words are even more striking in the Greek, which are each their own words. Fellow, katharisteti. It's an emphatic, intense expression.

Jesus' words convey to the man with an intensity. He is willing. You are worthy of this healing. I will do this. And be clean.

Jesus is entirely opposed to what's happening to this man. And he speaks strong words of newness and life and ultimately new identity. Mark reports that the man is healed immediately.

One of Mark's favorite words. The man's physical condition is renewed. His status of unclean reversed to that of clean. The man no longer had to wear signs of mourning, no longer had to live away from others, no longer had to call out unclean to announce himself wherever he was, and he was no longer cut off from God.

He could return to his family, his community, he could work again, share meals, and join with others in gatherings of worship.

[12:31] Now Jesus tells the man not to tell anybody about this, and for good reasons, and that's probably another sermon, but the next part is important. Jesus tells the man to go show the priest and to offer for his cleansing what the law, Leviticus 15 specifically, prescribes.

And this is not just Jesus upholding the law. This is Jesus using the established practices that would allow a religious authority to pronounce his new cleanness, his new identity, his new restored status within the community.

Adding to his physical healing was an emotional and inner healing from shame. A social and financial healing as the man re-entered community life and worship and began to work again.

So a couple takeaways for us. First, what do we learn about what Jesus is like? The way Jesus felt towards the man in today's passage is how he feels about you right now.

Whatever you have done, whatever has been done to you, whatever you feel makes you unacceptable or even cut off from God, Jesus feels an overwhelming emotional love for you and you are not cut off.

[13:55] In fact, when the man encountered Jesus, God the Son, in all his disease and all the shame, he found he wasn't actually cut off. The Son of God reached across the barrier to him with love and touched him and spoke those words that healed him and gave him new life.

Second, we all struggle at some point to believe that God is able or powerful enough to handle the big things that come at us. And we all struggle at some point to believe that he is willing to provide or protect or heal us.

And in this passage today, the moment that Jesus has with this man shows us that Jesus is both able and very willing with an intensity to do both, to help us.

And lastly, experiencing Jesus like this is something he passed on to the rest of us, to his followers. It's something that should be normal for us as a church and believers. And this is worth going after.

And I want to encourage all of us to keep coming to Jesus with whatever faith we have, with all our desperation and the rawness of it and seek him and the newness of life that he wants to give us.

[15:15] Let me pray for us. Lord Jesus, you know that we are frail and made of dust and so much of what can come at us in this life that is hard and dark, that is broken, unjust, oppressive, and evil is more than what we can handle.

And we know we need you. Help us believe that you are able, that you're big enough for it and help us believe that you want to, that you're willing to step in and help.

Help us keep showing up. Help us keep our hearts set on this vision, this picture of you that you just long to do for us what we can't do for ourselves and give us fullness of life in every way.

So Lord, in this season of Easter where we remember and celebrate your resurrection, your victory over death and sin, renew our faith, deepen our faith, and renew our showing up to you for the things we need.

And we thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.