

HOPE & PRAY - PART II: LIP BALM

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, FEBRUARY 12, 2006
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Appointed texts for the Sixth Sunday of Epiphany Season,
Lectionary year B:

First Lesson: 2 Kings 5:1-15

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. 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. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 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. 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." 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." 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." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 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." 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! 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. 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?'" 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. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company.

Gospel Lesson: Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

"Am I God, to give death or life, ... to cure a man?"

Last week we read the gospel story where Jesus' touch was sufficient to miraculously heal Peter's bedridden mother in law of a fever. Afterwards Jesus sought some solitude in prayer before resuming his trek to neighboring towns, proclaiming his message about the imminent reign of God; for, in Jesus' words, "that is what I came to do."

This week, we hear about another, even more spectacular miracle healing. With a touch and the mere utterance, "I do choose," a man is cured of what was once the incurable disease of leprosy, and "made clean." He was not only physically restored to health; but made ritually acceptable, as well, in order to return to his religious community, home and family.

What are we to draw from such a two-fold blessing?
What is the message behind the miracle?

Yesterday in New York City, an organization called *Balm in Gilead* hosted their "Second Annual Valentine's Day Tribute To Pastors," recognizing some in the local religious community who had demonstrated exemplary leadership in a *cause* – if not a *cure* – for thousands of people in their midst afflicted with a modern scourge. *Balm In Gilead* is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization with an international mission to stop the spread of HIV / AIDS throughout the African "diaspora," by helping faith communities provide AIDS education and support networks for all people living with, and affected by, HIV / AIDS.

Now, one might look at *Balm in Gilead* and say that's a wonderful *cause* and *ministry*; preaching a gospel of abstinence perhaps, or monogamy, or safe practices for prevention, or advocating for increased R&D, or the manufacturing and distribution of anti-retroviral drugs to sustain the lives of those already infected with an as-yet incurable, terminal disease.

But one might refrain from calling this organization's commendable work downright miraculous. The message they have to share might fall short of being regarded as resulting in a single case being *miraculously cured* and "made clean" of the disease we call AIDS.

The leaders who were honored by *Balm in Gilead* could practice their pastoral vocation of "doing good," with compassion and care for those in great need and peril. One could well argue it is the morally acceptable and humane thing to do. One could say the message and the work of the organization are important, and represent the highest values and ideals of humankind. But one could also be inclined to say the work they perform with the message they share falls short of *miraculous*. In a word, they don't do miracles the way Jesus did 'em! Not the way *we* read them.

The reserve we show for those gospel miracles may have less to do with any reverence we accord them; and more to do with our disbelief in their credibility; to the extent we certainly don't witness anything like that nowadays. Not the way the early Church tradition claims folks did back then.

On the other hand, the *message* of Jesus is something else, and far more palatable to us. He had some helpful ideas, people will say, about how to live a good life; though those same ideas *were* rather challenging – if not downright unbelievable, as well – if taken too seriously. The miracles, on the other hand, almost get in the way.

Recently, in an article in Harper's magazine entitled, *Jesus Without Miracles*, I re-read a story about the great Thomas Jefferson. Though he kept it under wraps in order to avoid political backlash that would have threatened his presidential bid back in 1800, we subsequently learned that Jefferson had once taken a pair of scissors to his own copy of the *King James Version* of the Bible, and snipped out all the troublesome, unbelievable parts.

Beginning with the virgin birth, he cut out all the miracle stories, concluding with the biggest one of all, the resurrection! Then he gathered up the remnants and pasted them all together. With what was left, he had what *we* might call his own non-canonical gospel of *Thomas*; but what Jefferson entitled simply, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. Later, he confidentially boasted to a friend how easy it was to do. It had only taken a couple nights work, even after long hours spent with his day job.

As Erik Reece, the author of the article put it, Jefferson believed authentic Christianity had been hijacked by the Church. The teaching of its founder had become so distorted as to make "one half of the world fools, and the other half hypocrites." With the radical removal of the miracles from the New Testament texts, Jefferson had triumphantly extracted the "diamonds from the dunghill," to reveal the true message of Jesus for what it was: "The most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man."

Jefferson's license might have sounded blasphemous to many true believers willing to swallow these outlandish miracle stories in the scriptures hook, line and sinker. But for others, the miraculous cures, the demonic exorcisms, even resuscitating the dead with such primitive and limited tools as a word or two and a gentle, compassionate touch – that's more than a bit of a stretch for some of us moderns; or even post-moderns. From the days of Thomas Jefferson, or the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, at least, such a dichotomy or distinction has seemingly been around for quite awhile.

Perhaps it's because there is so much these days in what appears to be more and more this Age of *post-*Reason that is so downright ludicrous and dangerous itself, that we might be willing to reconsider both the message and the miracles together again. What if the two were not mutually problematic for a discerning believer, but complementary and mutually illuminating. Let's reconsider a scripture text or two which I believe suggests you can't, in fact, have the miracle without the message; any more than you can try to selectively pick and choose a convenient message, without acknowledging both the longing for, and humble acceptance of, miracle.

In the story from II Kings, Naaman, the army commander is afflicted with leprosy. Now, here's a man who understands power and prowess; as well as the imminent threat of defeat from an incurable disease. In a sense, one might say it has taken him hostage; not unlike the young Israelite girl who's been captured in a military raid. Yet one could also surmise Naaman knows a thing or two about ransom demands, and how to negotiate for release and relief. So, thinking he'll avail himself of the best medical cure money can buy, he takes the equivalent of a king's ransom (the silver and shekels), along with all his horses and chariots, and goes to one whom he presumes to have great earthly power, the king of Israel.

The king's reply? "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?"

Instead, the king sends Naaman to Elisha, the "man of God." But before Naaman can even get an appointment with the holy man, a prescription gets delivered by a messenger, which essentially tells Naaman to go jump in the lake! Well, actually, he tells the mighty warrior to go dunk himself seven times in the Jordan for an instant cure. Ritual purification is presumed the appropriate cure for Naaman's ills.

At such a suggestion, anger and rage is Naaman's initial response, thinking it couldn't be as simple as that; until his own servants persuade him otherwise. In the end it proves more than sufficient. Naaman immerses himself seven times in the Jordan, and his flesh is miraculously restored. Unbelievable! At least according to modern medical science anyway, that's unbelievable.

But if you think that story's a little over the top, try the one we read in today's gospel passage from Mark. A leper approaches Jesus, kneels and begs, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And just like that, he gets his wish!

The one who is afflicted and suffering dares to initiate the encounter out of desperation and necessity; his prostrate position, in effect, acknowledges he believes he's come to the right place and the right person. Indeed, from what we've already been reading from Mark's account of Jesus amazing feats, his fame and power had already preceded him.

However, Mark portrays in Jesus a miracle healer who seems quite disinterested in promoting his own professional practice. In fact, Mark tells us Jesus considered all the notoriety and attention was instead a burden and distraction from his ability to spread the message; so much so that Jesus could no longer appear in public without having his days consumed with a countless stream of the possessed and diseased coming to him for miraculous cures.

In the account of this particular miracle healing, Mark tells us Jesus' response to the leper is three-fold. First, he acts out of compassion, as his sole reason for performing yet another miracle. Jesus was "moved with pity."

Second, Jesus readily acknowledges not only his power to cure, but thirdly, his concern for health and healing, as well. He first replies, "I do choose. Be made clean." Then he immediately follows up the miracle with an order that the man go and offer his restored condition to the temple priests, in compliance with the Mosaic tradition. In other words, Jesus links the restoration of the man's physical condition with spiritual wholeness and health; as if *that* is part of the message of a still-greater miracle.

These days, without Jesus' physical presence, we certainly don't see many of these kinds of physical miracle stories; not like those we read in the Bible; where, for example, seeming supernatural powers intervene and reverse the sometimes-irreversible course of natural diseases. Modern medical breakthroughs are sometimes

said to forestall the inevitability of our own mortality; and we sometimes call that a miracle. But they still pale in comparison to those simple, outlandish miracles we read in the gospels.

Briefly, here's what I generally do with all this business of miracles; *especially* at those times we are so desperate for one:

First, I have to say, the mere fact that you and I are alive, sensate beings, each one of us a complex creation that – the more we understand of our creation, the more marvelous we are in our eyes -- that's miraculous enough. The single breath of a single newborn is miraculous enough. The fact that this body of mine has worked for 58 years is *more* than miraculous enough. Remembering this often-underrated, everyday miracle, it seems to me we need to approach our skepticism about miracles with a little gratitude, reverence and no small amount of humility. In that sense, our lives are miracle enough.

Okay, okay, you say, but what about those un-natural, inexplicable miracles? To which I say, I really don't know. Because, here's the thing, *you can't explain a miracle without explaining it away.* But not only that, the greater power in miracle stories in the biblical texts is never to be found in the miracle itself, but in that to which it points. In the scriptures, there always seems to be a deeper message and more eternal reason for telling and retelling those miracle stories in the first place. I believe that's true whether the story is about a physical cure, or the restoration of sanity, or satisfaction of hunger, or changing water into fine wine, or quelling fears along with the storm at sea, or the like.

The third thing to say about miracles then is the important distinction between physical cure and spiritual health and wholeness. In the end, there is no cure for our mortality; except, of course, what we call our immortality in Christ. It is that faith and knowledge of our immortal nature that can restore and sustain my health and wholeness, no matter what happens to my mind, my body, my strength. That's the *message* we share about *miracle*. It's the message we proclaim to each other, remind and reassure one another. It is the deeper miracle and message we call our life in Christ. It is the miraculous life to which we have already been raised and are already living. It is the miracle of the life that will never die.

So, with that in mind, I accompany one of you to the hospital to visit a dear friend afflicted with an potentially-incurable, life-threatening disease. The room is filled with the latest medical technological devices for detection, diagnosis, monitoring and treatment. Not surprisingly, if possible, the family (like old Naaman) is prepared to spare nothing, and avail themselves of the best medical care money can buy. In the midst of all that extraordinary effort, what can *we* do? Furthermore, what ever can we *say*?

We enter the room of the sick, or the dying, armed only with a prayer on our lips; and in my pocket, always at the ready, a little silver oil stock. Inside the oil stock is a cotton swab, soaked with a slightly scented balsam oil, that's been blessed by a bishop of this same message we proclaim.

We'll anoint the sick with oil for healing. We'll use the same oil to anoint the dying, to soothe a weary soul. And the *message*, in the end, is the same; no matter what happens at the sick bed this time, or the next, or the one after that.

In worship this morning we'll sing the old African-American spiritual, *Balm In Gilead*:

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my life's in vain
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

That's the balm. Here's the message:

*If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, and say, "He died for all."*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

It's the miracle, and it's the message on our lips. It's the *lip balm*.

Amen.

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