

The Promise of Healing Along the Way of the Cross

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: March 19, 2023

Readings

I Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:1-14

John 9:1-13, 28-41

Opening

Last week I presented you with a question, a question of self-examination, as the Church calls us to self-examination in Lent. I asked you: to whom do you turn for refreshment when you're worn out and burned out?

I want to begin with the beginning of Lent again this morning, remembering two different moments in the Ash Wednesday service, for Ash Wednesday is a compass for the entire Lenten season. Right after we are called to self-examination and repentance for 40 days, we hear the opening words of Psalm 103 appointed for Ash Wednesday:

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!

*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, **who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.***¹

Lent is not only a season for repentance and spiritual disciplines; Lent is a season with promises. Lent is a season for promises. Bless the Lord who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases...who satisfies you with good that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. We receive promises of healing, redemption, love, mercy, and renewal, even as we take up our cross to follow Jesus.

There's a second moment for promises in the Ash Wednesday service, a subtle moment easily overlooked. Just before the ashes are blessed; before those same ashes are traced with the sign of the cross upon our foreheads, the priest mixes a little oil with the ashes. It is no small symbol. Yes, there is the practical purpose which bonds the ashes together, sealing them when signed above our eyes. But I see a promise within that anointing oil, for this oil is consecrated for our healing. After baptism, we receive anointing in the sign of the cross, sealed as Christ's own forever. Even as we hear the

¹ *Psalm 103.1-5*

solemn words of our mortality, ‘remember you are dust,’ the oil speaks a promise, too—the Lord promises to redeem and heal those who bear the sign of his cross. He will renew our strength and satisfy us with good things.

Section 2

Lent is not a season of raw spiritual disciplines, lacking a purpose. Repentance happens inside a Kingdom, the very Kingdom of God that happens to be putting this world back to rights, in N.T. Wright’s infamous phrase. God is restoring his good world to its original intent, and our repentance is a personal, active participation in that cosmic restoration.

This is the paradox of Lent, the promise within spiritual disciplines, *and* the very secret of how God restores his good world—the humble will be exalted. The humble will be healed.

We could speak at length about the moral decline in our world, lamenting a whole host of topics and issues. Wherever your mind goes when you think of moral decline, one of my greatest laments is the widespread rejection of humility in our world. Self-promotion is rewarded. Scorning one’s opponents earns cheers, applause, and thousands of views on YouTube. We put our trust in knowledge, in image, in outward appearances. Humility and meekness are mocked.

The Anointing of a King, the Healing of a Blind Man

No matter the age though, the eyes of the Lord are always upon the humble, the pure in heart. When the Lord sends Samuel to Jesse’s household, he’s searching for the one who will heal Israel from the disaster of Saul’s reign. The Lord doesn’t look for signs of outward strength; he does not focus on appearances. The Lord desires a pure heart, a humble heart in his king. That’s what Israel needs in this crisis. So bring out the *least* of your sons, Jesse—the smallest, the youngest. For he is the one the Lord has exalted; he is the one to be anointed as the Lord’s shepherd-king. He’s anointed to heal this nation. *This is how God restores the world he loves.*

The Lord not only seeks the humble in heart among kings, his eyes seek the ones laid low in the dust. He is ‘the God who sees,’ especially when one suffers humiliation and affliction. ²

The God who sees appeared in his Temple in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. After a lengthy exchange with Temple leaders about Abraham and his own mysterious identity, Jesus said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’³In that moment, they picked up stones to end Jesus’ life, but it was not time. Our Lord found an escape route out of the Temple, leaving that murderous mob behind.

Along his escape route out of the Temple, Jesus passed by a man blind from birth. With his life under threat, Jesus remained the God who sees. John 9.1: ‘As he passed by, Jesus saw a man blind from birth.’ Carries a bit more weight when you know a mob was searching for the Lord with stones in their hand at that same moment.

² Genesis 16.13

³ John 8.58

One would be hard-pressed to find a more invisible, humiliated human being in Jerusalem than a man blind from birth. His disciples see a theological case-study, interested in causation. Jesus sees a humble man he intends to heal, and not only heal his blindness, but exalt his position.

Our Lord could have healed the man in a number of ways. His word alone would have sufficed. But how did the Lord perform this healing? He anointed the man's eyes—with mud. He instructed the man to then wash in the pool of Siloam. His healing wasn't all passive; the Lord commanded the blind man to do something himself in this healing act. And leaving the pool of Siloam, he comes back seeing.

In the confusion of what happened, Jesus' accusers, the ones presumably who incited the mob when they discussed Abraham, question our healed beggar. And then something fascinating happens. He becomes a sort of arbiter, a mediator, even an instructor of what has happened. God loves reversals like these and this is how he's putting the world back to rights. Not only the personal world of a healed man, but the world of Jerusalem, the Holy City, corrupted by legalism and hypocrisy.

The man's anointing and his healing is a sign of divine power, but it is not the only sign, not the only manifestation of power. His physical sight is restored, yet the *second* sign is more wonderful than the first. What was that second sign of divine power?

After Temple leaders threw out the blind man from their midst, Jesus went searching for him. He is the God who sees; the God who searches for the humble. The Lord wastes no time when he finds our newly healed man, gets straight to the point: 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' The healed man believed Jesus to be a prophet, but didn't realize til now that he was the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah. And then, the man whose sight had been restored, recognizes Jesus is the Christ, confessing him as Lord. 'Lord, I believe,' he said. And then the greatest healing, the greatest wonder: 'and the man worshipped Jesus.' And the man was never more exalted, never more healed and restored than when he worshiped Jesus as Lord. That was his ultimate healing. That was his ultimate vindication and witness in this world. The Lord

The Rhyme of the Year

You may not realize it and it may sound strange, but this is the right time of the season to take joy in these Lenten promises of healing. The fourth Sunday of Lent was known in earlier times by another time, Laetare Sunday; also known as Refreshment Sunday. Laetare is a Latin word for 'rejoice.' For veteran Anglicans, you may hear an echo from Advent. Just after the midway point of Advent, we observe Gaudete Sunday, Gaudete also meaning 'rejoice.' These are the two penitential seasons of the year, each which call us to take heart, to rejoice, in the middle of our repentance. It is the rhyme of the Christian year.

Repentance is not our eternal condition; worship, praise, and joy are the eternal destiny for which we were redeemed. May repentance always be our attitude throughout our days in this mortal life, but when we are raised to immortality on the Last Great Day, we will be fully redeemed and rejoicing forever in God's eternal Kingdom. Repentance without a promise for eternal redemption would make no sense. Recall the last Sunday before Lent, Transfiguration Sunday—we do not turn to the cross without a vision of God's exalted glory in Jesus Christ.

And now, today, we turn toward the final stretch along the royal way of the cross refreshed with promises that God heals those who seek him; he exalts those who humble themselves. This is how the Lord restores us and his good world.

Closing

By the grace of God, we sing together the most beloved psalm, Psalm 23 on Refreshment Sunday. You know the words by heart, but hear them in the midst of our calling to repentance, our call to take up our cross, to bear our cross with patient endurance. Those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death, trusting in the Lord, will one day *leave* the deep, dark valley.

And what awaits them when they reach the uplands? A table, an overflowing cup, and *anointing* upon their heads. Healing comes to those who endure the dark valley. And a feast, a table, an overflowing cup.

It's an absurd image—an overflowing cup. As one writer noted, if you sat down at table and your host poured you a fine drink, you'd begin to get nervous when that level approached the brim. You'd be inclined to say, 'When! When! Enough!' But the Good Shepherd who exalts the humble; who leads his sheep *through* the dark valley knows not only what we can endure, he knows how to heal and restore our weary souls. Those he anoints and heals are meant to drink *deeply*, even from an overflowing cup.

This is same God who placed the Tree of Life in the Paradise of Eden. This is the same God who led Israel *through* the punishing wilderness into a land *flowing with milk and honey*; a land with abundant vineyards they neither plowed nor planted. This is the God who exalts the humble; who leads his people *through* pain so that they are refreshed by his hand alone. That's why we embrace his promise to heal us and exalt us, even while we follow him further this royal way of his cross. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.