

Jesus the healer

4 February 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Being sick isn't much fun ...

Can you remember the last time you were sick?

How did you feel?

In today's Bible story, there are quite a few sick people.

One of them is Peter's mother-in-law. We don't know her name – but perhaps we could give her a name. What shall we call her? 'Hannah'?

Well, Hannah was sick in bed with a fever and couldn't welcome her guests.

Back then, you couldn't just drive round to the chemist and buy Panadol or Codral or visit your local doctor.

Peter tells Jesus about her, thinking he'll know what to do. Jesus goes into her and takes her by the hand and helps her up – and she gets better – just like that!

Hannah is then able to be a more hospitable host – and can help prepare and serve a meal. She's back doing what she loves – entertaining special guests in Peter's house.

Later, the neighbours hear that Jesus is there and they bring around everybody else who's sick and pretty soon the place looks like a doctor's waiting room. And Jesus goes around helping each one.

I want you to look at your hands and think about some of the things we do with our hands ... In this story Jesus **heals** with his hands.

Hannah **serves** with her hands.

People **help** their neighbours with their hands.

Next morning, Jesus **prays** with his hands.

I wonder what are some of the ways we can help with our hands ...

BIBLE READINGS

We listen for the word of the Lord.

Our ears and hearts are open.

Isaiah 40:21-31 (responsively)

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?



Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.

**He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.**

He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

**No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.**

'To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One.

**Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
who created all these?**

He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.

**Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.**

Why do you complain, Jacob?

Why do you say, Israel,

**'My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God'?**

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

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

**He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.**

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

**Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;**

but those who hope in the Lord

will renew their strength.

**They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.**

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all who were ill and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to search for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'

Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.' So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us,
thanks be to God.

MESSAGE Jesus the healer

I don't know how house proud you are, but three non-negotiables I learnt from my mother are that, when expecting visitors, the kitchen floor needs to be swept, the dishes done and the bathroom clean. Having some food one could easily draw upon was also handy. With these things in place, the house was then considered ready for entertaining visitors.



In today's reading from Mark, which continues the story of a typical day in the life of Jesus, the disciples and Jesus go straight from church back to Peter's house where there's a somewhat embarrassing problem.

Peter and Andrew immediately tell Jesus about Peter's mother-in-law, who is unnamed but who I've called Hannah. Perhaps they hope Jesus will heal her, but more likely they're trying to explain why the house is in such a mess and why a meal is not ready and waiting.

Ignoring social protocols, Jesus goes straight to the part of the house where Hannah is lying, sick with a high fever. What follows is typical of Jesus' ministry: Mark tells us that Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them.



There are many more healing stories in the Gospels and each story is slightly different. There is nearly always human touch from Jesus and often a simple spoken word. Jesus meets people where they are, has compassion for them and restores them to wholeness. Unlike some of our modern medical practices where the focus is so often addressing individual symptoms, Jesus sees the whole person and treats the whole person.

We may have various questions regarding Jesus' healings including whether they happened as described, and how, and whether such healings are possible today. However we may respond to these questions, it's clear that each of the four Gospel writers assume that Jesus healed people, regularly.

So coming from that perspective, here are three brief observations.

First, Jewish people had quite strict rules about what was clean and unclean. A sick person was often considered **unclean** and thus to be avoided. **Touching** them would make you unclean also.



While there may be early practices of quarantine behind such rules, Jesus seems to ignore these rules. Rather than becoming unclean himself, Jesus' touch brings healing and wholeness to the sick person.

Second, Jesus **lifts her up**. This may simply be a practical detail if Hannah was lying on a mat on the floor.



Some commentators point out, though, that Mark uses the same word to describe the resurrection of Jesus. The word may suggest the imparting of new strength to those laid low by sickness or even death, so they may again take their place in the world. The Isaiah reading contains a similar idea of having one's strength renewed as one waits

on God.

Third, the goal of Jesus' healing is restoration of the person into their community ... here Hannah is healed and begins to **serve** the guests. Before we impose unhelpful stereotypes on the story – that a woman's place is only to serve – there's a suggestion here that Hannah is actually being held up as a role model for all disciples.



The Greek word used to describe Hannah's actions is **diakoneu**, which comes from the same root word as **diakonos** that lies behind the English word **deacon**, one who serves.

Earlier in the chapter when Jesus is being tested in the wilderness, Mark writes that angels **served** Jesus, using this same word.

Much later in the story, when Jesus is being crucified, the male disciples all desert him but several women remain near the cross. Mark writes that these women **served** Jesus – again using the verb **diakoneu** – implying that they looked after his needs.

When the male disciples argue about who will be the greatest, Jesus offers a very different paradigm:

*Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your **servant** (diakonos) ... for the Son of Man came not to be served (diakonew) but to serve (diakonew), and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43-45)*

So here, Hannah illustrates that serving others is one of the bedrocks of discipleship in Jesus' upside-down world. Having received God's grace and healing, disciples are called to become channels of that same grace by serving others. This pattern of receiving and serving makes for a caring community.

There's a saying that 'bad news travels fast'.
It seems that **good news** can also travel fast.
Word soon gets around about Hannah's healing – and as soon as the Sabbath day ends at sunset, people start bringing or carrying their sick friends to Jesus, who heals many of them – whether of physical or mental illnesses.



After a fairly exhausting day, Jesus could well be excused for having a good sleep-in next morning. Instead, he gets up while it's still very dark – perhaps 5 am – and goes off to a quiet secluded place to pray.

There's a definite rhythm to Jesus' life – after periods of intense activity, he pauses to spend time alone with God – to listen, to reflect, to be encouraged and be strengthened. It's a bit like breathing out and then breathing in, breathing out

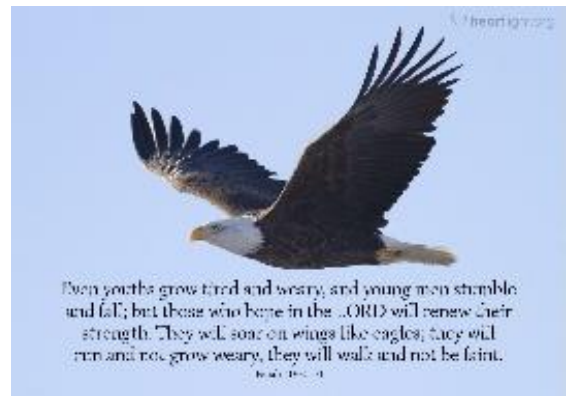
and breathing in.

It shows that the first and highest priority for Jesus each day is to seek God and to give attention to God before being swamped by the needs of the day.

If Jesus demonstrates this pattern clearly enough for Mark to write it in his Gospel, I can only conclude that it's a wise example to follow. For some of us getting up while it's still dark might be a bridge too far, but we can all choose to start the day by

seeking God in prayer.

As the Isaiah reading cautions, when we rely just on our own strength, even fit young people will eventually become weary, if not exhausted. But if we will take some time out and wait on God, then our strength can be renewed and we can again soar, or run, or perhaps just walk.



When we pause to pray, not only are we strengthened, but also reminded of our core calling. Jesus' calling isn't to become a celebrity healer based in Capernaum, however much the disciples are warming to this idea.

Jesus' calling is to proclaim the message of good news that God's kingdom is for all people and it's drawing near.

So after praying, Jesus leaves Capernaum to go to other towns. There's another lesson for us here. Jesus was always prepared to try new things and go to new places. At the start of a new year, and especially as we ponder what mission or ministry God may be calling this community to explore, it may be helpful if we are willing to go to new places with Jesus.

The disciples don't yet understand all this. They apparently like their new found fame and have begun searching for Jesus, wanting to direct his every step. The Greek word used is quite strong, meaning to pursue or hunt, usually with hostile intention. They want Jesus to conform to their concept of ministry. But Jesus has a different vision – and a different calling.

So he will leave behind new disciples – people like Hannah – so that they can tell their own story of what God has done for them. Later, Jesus will send out the 12 disciples two by two to repeat and extend his message that God is about the business of building God's kingdom through healing, strengthening, encouraging, enabling and restoring people.

This is the message that needed to be heard and received and passed on to others in the days of Jesus' ministry.

It's the same message that needs to be heard, received and passed on today.

God is still in the healing and wholeness business today.