

“A Question of Evidence”

Reading: 1 John 3:1-7; Acts 3:1-19

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This last week, as you may be aware, witnessed a great tragedy. Blue Bell Ice Cream issued a massive recall for all of their ice cream across the country due to the possibility of contamination by listeria bacteria, which has the potential to make humans seriously ill. It brings a tear to my eye to think of so much ice cream just going to waste; perhaps we should have a moment of silence. These things happen from time to time, when for some reason or other, something in our food chain gets contaminated or someone doesn't follow the right protocols to make sure everything is sanitary, and suddenly we hear on the news that we need to throw out our spinach or peanut butter or ice cream. It reveals how interconnected our food supply is these days: one problem across the country or even across the world can, at least potentially, make millions of people sick. Of course it rarely if ever gets that bad, but still it can call into question the wisdom of our food supply. Yes, we're now able to provide more food more quickly and less expensively than ever before, but when there's a problem, it's a big problem.

My goal is not to make you paranoid about the food you buy at the grocery. The fact that there are not more problems than there are, and the fact that there are such things as recalls when there is a problem, show that on the whole the system works fairly well. But when things break down, when there's an anomaly, when we trust something and it suddenly doesn't seem so consistent, it can erode our confidence at least a little, and maybe we even start considering other options or questioning our wisdom.

You can have a loving and committed relationship with someone, but if they start spouting hurtful things at you, it can undermine years of love. You can have a coworker who works faithfully for years, but if they steal from the company coffers once, that trust is damaged at least. Someone can serve as a moral example to others, and then have one moment of weakness, and their integrity is called into question. We all have those examples from life when something goes wrong and we have to examine some of the foundational assumptions we've made in our relationships or behaviors. To some degree that's just life, because no one and nothing is perfect all the time. Sometimes those failures are not that hard to get over, while other times it's a serious problem. An ice cream recall is pretty easy to move beyond, but a deep betrayal can destroy a relationship, a family, a business, a church.

Maybe there is no more common time to raise these sorts of questions than in times of sickness. It's in those times when we might cry out to God for the first time in our lives. We trust God with our very souls, and we can spend our lives serving Him, and we can devote hours and hours to prayer in which we trust our needs to Him, but sickness or injury can come, and what does that tell us about God? We proclaim that God is good and He is powerful; He should be willing and able to relieve us of the problem of pain and evil. So, at least for some people, they look at the evidence and conclude that either God must not be good, or He must not be powerful, and their trust is eroded if not lost altogether.

And maybe to make it even worse, we have lots of examples from the Bible and from Christian history of miraculous healings. Sometimes God does indeed answer those kinds of prayers, if the

stories and testimonies are true. Why not for me? Why not for my loved one? What does this evidence tell us about God and His character and His power and His plan? Let me suggest to you that the problem of pain is not so much evidence against God's power or ability or character; it is not a sign that God's plan has failed. It is instead a sign that our world is groaning under the weight of darkness. It is not a sign that God has failed, it is a sign that God's work is not yet finished. And in fact, the presence of goodness and healing in our world is a foretaste of the coming consummation of God's work. When we see healing, we do not see what God could do for me or my loved one if only He wasn't so stingy or weak, we see what God will do when He makes all things right.

Our Scripture passage for today tells the story of one such healing. It is, in fact, the first healing we see performed in the book of Acts, which is set in the weeks and months and years immediately after Jesus was raised from the dead. One afternoon shortly after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and John, two of Jesus' followers, were on their way to prayer in the temple when they encountered a beggar who had been lame from birth. Rather than giving the man a few coins to keep him going for another day, they give Him an encounter that will transform his life: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, they heal the man. He goes running and leaping into the temple, praising God, and probably making quite a scene. Apparently he was well-known as a beggar, because people recognized him, but they were understandably surprised at his newfound mobility.

The people in the crowd start questioning Peter and John, and Peter's response is very illuminating. "Why does this surprise you?" he asks. There's more to that question than you might think at first; obviously they're surprised by a lame man suddenly running and jumping. "Why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" And from there Peter goes into a mini-sermon about how they conspired to have Jesus killed, but God raised Him from the dead. "By faith in the name of Jesus," Peter says, "this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through Him that has completely healed him, as you can all see."

Why does this surprise you? The really surprising thing in that moment was not that the lame beggar was walking. The surprising thing was how. Jesus was dead and crucified; He was publicly shamed and defeated by the Romans and the Jewish leaders. That should have been the end of Jesus' little band of followers. His teachings should have been discredited, His power should have been dissipated, and His name should have become a curse word. Should have.

Instead, we're seeing Jesus' enemies' nightmare, because Jesus is, they think, dead and gone, but now the same sorts of things Jesus did are happening again. One of the most obvious things Jesus did during His ministry was heal the sick, and now His followers are doing the same thing. Why does this surprise you? This means that the work of Jesus did not end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. This means that the mission Jesus began did not end at Easter. This means, in fact, that the church, the followers of Jesus, continue doing the same sorts of things we read about Jesus doing in the gospels. Jesus was raised from the dead and is alive forevermore: the curse placed on His name by humans was not stronger than the affirmation given it by God, and the mission of Jesus that was crushed on that cross continues and multiplies exponentially among those who claim the name of the risen Christ.

It's a fair question to ask why Jesus did all those healings and things in the first place. Think about it: for many Christians, what really counts is that Jesus died for my sins so that I can go to heaven when I die, which means that really, we can effectively cut out all but the last couple of chapters of the gospels. If the sacrifice of Jesus is all that matters for my salvation, what's the point of all the stuff that comes before it? Jesus healing a blind man two thousand years ago doesn't really do anything for me and my problems today, does it? It shows us that Jesus was a nice guy, but what's really the point?

And this is where we get back to the question we asked in our sermon a couple of weeks ago: the death and resurrection of Jesus defeats death itself and provides forgiveness of sins, but what else does it do? What impact does it have on my life, not just my afterlife? Is Easter the end of the story of God's work with us, and there's really nothing else going on, or is it the beginning of a whole new chapter? And if so, what's in that chapter?

Peter tells the crowd of onlookers that this man has been healed not through Peter's own power, but by the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus spent His ministry proclaiming that the kingdom of God was near, that God was establishing His reign over this world and was instituting a new order of restoration and redemption and forgiveness. So to answer the question of why we have all those healings and other things in the gospels that don't seem so critical to the story of salvation, when Jesus healed someone He did so as evidence that the kingdom of God was really at hand. God really was in control, so to prove it, here are the sorts of things that happen in God's kingdom: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and so on. When Jesus heals someone, it's not just an unnecessary add-on to the story of the cross, it's an integral part of the preaching of the good news that God has arrived. And now, Peter says, far from stopping the arrival of the kingdom of God in Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus have launched it forward, and now God's people are carrying on with that same proclamation.

Why does this surprise you? You shamed Him and crucified Him, but God used your rebellion to prove His faithfulness, and He is still being faithful. His kingdom is still breaking into our world. It is specifically the name of Jesus that brings this healing, because it is specifically in the name of Jesus and through the work of Jesus that the kingdom comes.

So what else does the cross of Christ do in our lives today, beyond saving us after we die? It inaugurates in us the kingdom of God. It hands to us the work of the kingdom. It calls all of us who are in Christ to continue the mission that Jesus began of proclaiming to the world that God is telling the darkness to let His people go, because He is coming back to reclaim the creation that He made and that He loves. The age of the kingdom of God began with Jesus and it did not end with His crucifixion. Why does this surprise you?

This is why I can say that the presence of sickness and pain in our world today does not disprove the goodness or the power of our God. His kingdom is breaking in, but it is not yet here in its fullness. The presence of sickness is not a sign that God has failed, it is a sign that the old regime of sin and sickness and death is still lingering, and our world is still waiting for God's final act of salvation and power. And so when we see God performing acts of healing, they are like the daffodils cracking through the crusted earth: they are reminders that God's faithfulness has not failed, and they are foretastes of the beauty yet to come.

And this is why we pray for one another for healing, because we carry on with the mission Jesus began, and we continue to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand. It does not mean that we don't go to doctors or take medicine, because God certainly works through them. And it doesn't mean that if God does not heal us then we lack faith or didn't pray enough or are necessarily guilty of some unconfessed sin; that's not how it works. No, we pray for healing because Jesus is faithful, because His kingdom is coming, because His resurrection echoes throughout history and those echoes are getting louder and louder until He comes again. We pray for healing not just out of hope for our healing, but also as a sign of our trust in the name of Jesus and as a sign to our world that the kingdom of God is arriving. Let us, therefore, pray for one another's healing.



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