“***Many Who Were Sick***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 14, 2020

**Isaiah 40:28–31**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

**Mark 1:29–35**

29As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

I try to imagine Simon’s and Andrew’s house in Capernaum, not a huge place, but enough to house a small family. I imagine a yard out front. That is important, because of all the people who are going to show up in that yard that evening.

I think this is the most amazing healing story of all, because it is a mass healing. It starts with him tenderly ministering to Peter’s mother-in-law, healing her, and then the whole town brings their people near the front door, and he cures many with diseases or with demons. It’s a remarkable story about Jesus’ compassion and power.

Here’s my problem. Why are there so many people with diseases, physical anomalies, or genetic problems? Why is there so much suffering here on earth? It was true then, and it is true now: millions of people suffer from a range of afflictions. It strikes us as fundamentally unfair. People who have leukemia or Crone’s disease did nothing to bring that on. And no one deserves to have pancreatic cancer—or *any* cancer. These are not afflictions that are deserved, nor can I see them as teaching us a lesson. They are the misfortunes of living in a material world. Rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). The danger of various kinds of suffering is inherent in living in this world. Miraculous rescues and healings may still happen, but not as frequently as they happened in the presence of the Master when he walked the earth.

There is a line in Lamentations that says the Lord “does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone” (Lam 3:33). I think that’s true. God does not send afflictions, nor punish us with sufferings. And yet, such grief and sorrow *do* happen, and seem to be unavoidable. It is just part of the price of living in this world. It goes with the territory.

God would rather heal these afflictions, as we see Jesus doing for the whole town of Capernaum. And we will not have these problems in the afterlife. But normal life down here seems to come with this negative baggage, and these vulnerable life-vehicles. Even if you get a pretty good vehicle, it will decline with time. It is the nature of life in this world. Animals go through it, too.

It should teach us all to have compassion on people who suffer, and our communities certainly benefit from the charitable organizing efforts of kind-hearted people. Charities help to foster human solidarity. Also, we are taught that God knows our sufferings. In Isaiah there is a great line that says “In all their affliction he was afflicted” (Isa 63:9 RSV and NASB). This tells us God suffers with us.

I think that helps us deal with this problem. So also does the knowledge that the divine Son, when he lived here, suffered, not just at his death, but in having to deal with his disbelieving family, his uncomprehending followers, and the hard-hearted priests of his country. These were hard experiences, and he was lead to weep over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44). He lived a real life, with aches and pains, triumphs and disappointments.

And that is probably some of the best comfort we can take, the knowledge that Jesus knows what it is like to deal with unfairness, spiritual blindness, and cruelty—not because we want him to have suffered, but because we want him to understand *our* suffering. He lets us know we are not alone.

Maybe the same point can be made in a more positive way. Jesus understands whatever we are experiencing. And his answer is to try to empower us to get through it. Maybe Jesus would speak with the words of Isaiah, promising us that, with faith, we will be as those who “shall renew their strength” and “mount up with wings like eagles” (40:31), because God “strengthens the powerless” (40:29). In his own words, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). There is a miraculous reversal that can happen. And there is a promised fulfillment for all who seek God: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt 5:6).

God is in the reversal business. Also in the surprising grace business. God will surprise us again and again, renewing our strength when we don’t expect it, aiding the meek and the humble when they weren’t looking for it. God abides with us in our lonely and painful times, and rejoices with us when we experience one of those great reversals. God sits with us, walks with us, jumps for joy with us.

The medieval British saint, Julian of Norwich, experienced a great reversal. She became so ill that everyone thought she was dying, and the last rites were administered to her. Then she experienced a series of revelations in which she encountered Jesus. In one revelation, she expressed sorrow over the fact that sin existed at all. She heard Jesus answering her; he “said, ‘It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and **all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’** These words were said most tenderly, showing no manner of blame to me nor to any who shall be saved**” (*Revelations of Divine Love*). Julian pulled through and lived another 33 years, becoming a famous saintly anchoress, or hermit, to whom people came for advice.**

The secret is to share one’s inner life with God. We will have sorrow in this life, often for others rather than ourselves. That is a bitter herb that we need for this complicated stew that we are cooking. The good experiences are the meaty bits. God will preserve every bit of worthwhile experience that we have, and we’ll have more of those experiences if we share everything with God.

I’m going to use Psalm 25 as an example of sharing our experience with God: “Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me” (Ps 25:4–5). This is not just asking for external help, for help in the world. It is asking for *internal* help. If you share any experience with God, the experience will be transformed. Sharing with God shows your love for, and trust in, God. Transformation shows God’s loving work upon us.

So hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God’s presence. Share your inner life with God, and you will be filled.

As the Psalm says, “He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way” (Ps 25:9). We don’t know why there is so much suffering on this earth, but we try to do our part to alleviate some of it, by seeking to do God’s will. Rain falls on the just and the unjust, on this level. God does not willingly afflict us, yet afflictions do come. Jesus goes with us through each of them, assuring us that all will eventually be made right. If we honestly share our thoughts and hopes with God, God transforms our living. Hunger and thirst for goodness, and you will be filled.