



## JOHN P. WEBSTER LIBRARY

### A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings FEBRUARY 2006

#### February 5, 2006

Isaiah 40:21-31  
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c  
I Corinthians 9:16-23  
Mark 1:29-39

#### February 12, 2006

II Kings 5:1-14  
Psalm 30  
I Cor. 9:24-27  
Mark 1:40-45

#### February 19, 2006

Isaiah 43:18-25  
Psalm 41  
II Cor. 1:18-22  
Mark 2:1-12

#### February 26, 2006

II Kings 2:1-12  
Psalm 50:1-6  
II Corinthians 4:3-6  
Mark 9:2-9

In the January readings, we explored the question of how individuals respond properly to God's love and mercy in the circumstances of their own individual lives. We saw how God always works with an eye on our individual needs—but also always sees us as individuals within the broader context of community. In the February readings, we look at some specific examples of what this balance of individual and community can mean: how God transforms us, and to what end.

One of the most striking ways that God transforms us is by healing us—often metaphorically, but sometimes literally. In the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, we have the clearest model of how God's healing power works in the world. Jesus' healing of Peter's mother in Mark 1:29-39 presents an outline: "(a) description of the illness, (b) request for healing, (c) action by the healer, (d) evidence that the ailing person has been restored to health."<sup>1</sup> The evidence of her healing, in this case, is that she cooks for Jesus and the disciples after being healed. This detail is significant, because it shows that she was not only healed for own sake, but so that she could serve others. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 develop this theme more broadly: "Christian freedom is not freedom to do what you like, but freedom *from* all the things that stop you from being the person God really wants you to be, which is freedom *for* the service of God and the gospel."<sup>2</sup> This message is not always welcome. Some Christians are looking for license, not freedom. They are looking for no-strings approval from God, not a commission. This problem is not a new one for the people of God;

the prophet's complaint in Isaiah 40 is prompted by a people who "are looking for magic, not for miracle; for a genie, not for the Creator of the universe."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, we are not restored to full health when a particular act of healing is finished, but when we take up our proper place within God's creation. We are not meant to simply acknowledge what God has done in our lives and then move on, but to shape our lives so that God's work may be more fully done through us. Paul's athletic metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 underscores the importance of staying focused on the full meaning of the Good News: "Rather than just talking about the gospel, we are called to pay the price of sacrifice and discipline in order to *play* the game rightly and thus to win the prize."<sup>4</sup>

Part of being disciplined is accepting God's guidance in how we are to make use of God's gifts, even when God's intentions for us are less exciting than we might wish. When Jesus heals the leper in Mark 1:40-45, he does so with a warning to keep the truth of his healing hidden. The healed man is told instead to follow the ordinary practice of offering thanksgiving for recovery from illness, teaching the lesson that part of God's guidance is "the discernment to know when to speak and when to be silent, when what we are called to do should be kept secret and when it should be celebrated publicly."<sup>5</sup> Naaman, who is healed by the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 5, is also directed to take ordinary steps to be healed, instead of taking part in something flashy and extraordinary. Unlike the man Jesus heals, Naaman follows the guidance he receives, showing his obedience and, through his obedience, his faith. However: "Faith was not a precondition for health; health was given in order to create faith."<sup>6</sup> After all, the healed man who cannot keep quiet does not have his health taken away from him. Through the stories of both men, the world learns that there is a prophet in Israel, showing forth the truth of Israel's God.

This knowledge transformed the healed leper and Naaman, and it has the power to transform us as well. Once again, this transformation is meant to lead to the service of others; the friends of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 do not look to their faith to benefit themselves, but instead act on their faith to get their afflicted friend to Jesus so that he can be healed. “Jesus’ people have to be for the world what he was for Israel. We have to find ways of bringing healing and forgiveness to our communities.”<sup>7</sup> Given the brokenness of the world and our communities, finding these ways usually means changing our expected way of doing things. In 2 Corinthians 1:18-22, Paul addresses the idea that doing a new thing could be seen as a betrayal of the old: “What we need, if we are followers of the Messiah and learning what it means to belong to him, is to grow up ‘into’ him.”<sup>8</sup> Growing inevitably involves change, often unexpected change: “God is not merely faithful but also loving and caring, and we should display the same in our lives...Are we too fearful of being unworthy of God?”<sup>9</sup> Are we more concerned about being right than about being loving? In Isaiah 43, the prophet shows that in our desire for certainty and dependability, “the newest threat to freedom was the prison of the people’s own lethargy, and one bar in that prison was the wistful sort of memory of the past that dulls one’s alertness to the present.”<sup>10</sup>

The story of the Transfiguration in Mark 9:2-9 reminds us to be open to the unexpected in the present: “as we learn to listen, even if sometimes we get scared and say all the wrong things, we may find that glory creeps up on us unawares, strengthening us, as it did the disciples, for the road ahead.”<sup>11</sup> Peter, James, and John can see the transformed Christ, and so can take up the mantle of apostlehood. In the same way, when Elisha witnesses the ascension of Elijah in 2 Kings 2, it is the act of witnessing itself that enables him to receive a “double share” of the spirit of Elijah, marking him as the successor to the great prophet. We need to learn, as did these earlier disciples, that “God’s whirlwind blows away every love, every security, every safety. The same changeless God pushes

ceaseless change on the world.”<sup>12</sup> We are not restored to full health when a particular act of healing is finished, nor are we granted the fullness of wisdom when a particular act of revelation is finished, but when we take up our proper place within God’s creation. And as long as we live, the living God makes sure that our proper place is always changing, because the world itself and our communities are always changing.

It is especially important to remember this truth because we are often all too willing to put all the blame for the brokenness of the world on the people around us, secure in our own sense of righteousness (or at least in our own sense of being forgiven). It is easy to get false comfort from Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, “easy to use Satan as an excuse for the unbelief of others when the fault may lie in our own failure in the presentation of the gospel—and it is not only preachers who present it...The gospel is not a set of abstract truths to be announced but a way of life to be lived.”<sup>13</sup> God transforms us not so we can meet some abstract ideal—of health, wisdom, or anything else—but so that we are equipped to live in service to others.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 543.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1995), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1997), 158.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1987), 182.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Mark*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1987), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Hanson, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, *Mark*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson, 163.

<sup>13</sup> Best, 38-39.