

FOCUS: The Good News is the faithful find healing and restoration through their faith.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Do not remember the former things, or consider things of old,”¹ the prophet tells the Chosen People. God is about to do a “new thing,” and the people are called to be ready for it.

“All who hate me whisper together about me,” the psalmist laments. “But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever,” the psalmist declares in thanksgiving to God.

“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home,”² Jesus told the paralytic man. And those gathered declared they had never seen anything like this before.

In these three readings this morning, we hear a message of faithfulness and integrity and how they related directly to healing and reconciliation. All three texts offer us good lessons on life in the community of the faithful, and what the rewards of faithful living include.

In the passage from Isaiah, which comes from the part of Isaiah known as Second Isaiah, and was likely written during the period of the exile of the Israelites from the Promised Land into Babylon, brings us a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, even when it would appear it’s not deserved. The prophet declares the word of the Lord, “You people haven’t brought me any offerings. You people haven’t made the required sacrifices. You people haven’t done *anything* except burden me with your sinful behavior!” Make no mistake, dear friends, the Lord is *not* happy with the actions of the Israelites.

But, the Lord is about to do something different. Rather than casting pain and suffering and anguish upon His Chosen People, the Lord is going to “blot out [the people’s] transgressions *for [God’s] own sake.*” Note that God isn’t choosing to not remember the sins of the people for *their* sake, but for God’s own sake. Even when the Chosen People act in ways contrary to God’s command, God still reaches out to them and forgives them. Once again, God is keeping the covenant with His Chosen People.

What’s “new” about this is that the Israelites aren’t used to having sins forgiven unconditionally. No, they expected—indeed, they were required—to make certain sacrifices in the Temple in order to atone for their sinfulness. However, since the Temple had been destroyed and not yet rebuilt, let alone the Israelites being returned

¹ Isaiah 43:18 (NRSV)

² Mark 2:11 (NRSV)

from exile, God declares to them their unconditional forgiveness. God *so* wants to be reconciled and in relationship with His creation that He takes matters into His own hands. God forgives the sinfulness of His creation.

In our psalm this morning, we hear the psalmist crying out to the Lord for healing and forgiveness. The psalmist sees all those who have turned against him, and starts to think that the rise of his enemies comes because he has been sinful or unfaithful to the Lord. However, the psalmist, after calling out to God to heal him, “for [he] has sinned against [God],”³ and spells out all that has fallen upon him, especially how the people around him—those whom he trusted and upon whom he relied—turned against him. The psalmist tells of how people patronize him with empty words, but in their hearts plot against him. Further, he tells of how those whom he trusted gossip and bear false witness about him, and wish him to have misfortune. It’s not a very pretty sight. But, the psalmist does not fall into despair and flee. No, the psalmist comes to realize that, even as his enemies have tried to tear him down, the Lord has supported him and been with him all along. The Lord, rather than being angry at the psalmist, is in fact *pleased* with him. The Lord is pleased with him because the psalmist has shown integrity in dealing with his opponents and he has stayed faithful to the Lord. In the face of opposition and a “whisper campaign” against him, the psalmist has been strengthened—healed, if you will—through God’s unconditional love and forgiveness.

Once again, as we heard in the words of the prophet, we hear of the forgiveness of God and the protection by God of those who are under siege or conflict. The Lord does indeed reward those who are faithful in the face of sinfulness and evildoing. God forgives the sinfulness of His creation.

During the time of Jesus, and really for centuries before and after, medical knowledge was limited at best. It was widely believed that sickness and illness befell a person because the person had done something to anger God or was in some way sinful. Of course, today we have a greater understanding of what causes illness and disabilities, even if we don’t fully understand the causes. However, many times we still ask questions like, “Why did God do this to me?” and “What did I do to God to deserve this?” Even in the face of a world of medical knowledge, we often revert back to ancient questions and fears. Like the psalmist, we wonder what we did to deserve these challenges.

Of the many challenges we might face today, paralysis is one of the most difficult to understand. Christopher Reeve, known to the world as the late twentieth-century “Superman,” and the twenty-first century’s spokesman for research to cure paralysis, is but one, very public, example. It would be easy for Mr. Reeve to blame God for his

³ Psalm 41:4 (NRSV)

condition. What did he do to deserve his fate? Was it because he was a sinful man? Did he do something to offend God?

Christopher Reeve's injury—being thrown from a horse and falling *just so* to cause his neck to break without killing him—was an accident. He didn't *do* anything to *deserve* what happened to him. It simply happened. Did he do something to offend God? I don't know, but I have no reason to believe that he did. By all accounts and his own admission, Mr. Reeve wasn't a man of strong faith before the accident, but there is no evidence that he "offended" God.

"Ah hah!" you might be saying. "It must be that he was a sinful man that he was injured, Pastor. You skipped that one, and we know how your preaching style works!"

I'm sorry to disappoint you, dear friends, but being a sinful man had nothing to do with his accident. If it did, you and I should be expecting a traumatic injury or illness as well.

Christopher Reeve is a sinful person. So is Art Hebbeler. So, too, are each and every one of you. It is our nature. We don't want to hear it, but it is a fact. *We are sinners*. Now, what are we to do about it?

The paralytic man was healed not because he was a righteous man, but because he and his four friends came to see Jesus because they had *faith* that Jesus could heal him. It wasn't easy for the four mat-bearers to get the paralytic man to Jesus. They had to get him to the house, and then climb up a ladder, then lift the man from the ground to the rooftop, then dig through many inches of mud and thatch, then lower the man down through the hole in the roof to Jesus' side. It wasn't easy for the five men to show their faith. They had to work to do it.

But, in showing their faith in the power of God represented in the ministry of Jesus, the men were rewarded. "Son," Jesus said to the man, "your sins are forgiven." All that work just to hear five short words. He was a sinner, but he was a *faithful* sinner. And Jesus knew this, and so he did something that was new, something different than the people expected. Just as the Lord God did something new and unexpected for the Israelites as we heard from the prophet Isaiah, so too did Jesus do something new and unexpected in the presence of other Israelites. Jesus, is a sign that we can see clearly today as one showing his divinity, declared the forgiveness of the man's sins. That was unheard of, and it set the tongues of the scribes wagging.

By faith, you and I and all believers are healed. We are made whole and reconciled with God by God's grace through faith. When we hear the words of absolution, it is not "I, Art Hebbeler, declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins." Rather, it is *by Christ's authority* and his authority alone that I make such a declaration to you.

As we are lying on our own mats, paralyzed by our sinfulness and brokenness, we need to be healed. We need to reach out to one another, as well as to God, and like the psalmist, cry out, “O Lord, be gracious to me!” We need cease whispering about one another. We need to set aside the malice, the hurtful gossiping, the paralyzing hatred that is holding back our ministry in this place. It isn’t easy to get to the feet of Jesus, especially when we are paralyzed. But, at the feet of Jesus we must be. At the feet of Jesus, our friends must place us.

Which is easier to say, and to hear, as a paralyzed person, “by *Christ’s* authority, I declare to you’re the *entire forgiveness* of all your sins,” or “Stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.”? In which statement do you place *your* faith?