

Epiphany 5 B  
Isaiah 40:21-31  
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
Mark 1:29-39

Rev. Trish Schmermund  
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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

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In January, a few of us got together here at Holy Spirit to watch the movie *The Shack*. Without spoiling it for you (in case you haven't seen it) it's the story of a family whose youngest daughter is abducted and killed. The topic is probably one of the most feared in any family. But as dramatic as such a tragedy would be, it isn't really the main story line. It's really a story of a relationship between God and a man named Mack and how God brings healing into darkness.

We all know tragedy. It enters our lives without invitation and without waiting for us to be ready for it. It comes in every size and shape and while at times tragedy strikes quick and hard, at other times it lingers for a lifetime. Understanding why bad things happen is difficult for anyone, but it can be especially hard for people of faith. We look to God for answers, for guidance, for protection and as we do so, we can never seem to be comfortable with equating God and pain together.

Unfortunately, in trying to make sense of it all we might sometimes tempted to ascribe to God characteristics that do not fit. We've all heard (and maybe even said ourselves at times) well intended things like: *God had a plan for your loved one. You can have another child. God punishes those who sin. God took them for a special purpose.*

Sometimes we are unkind to ourselves. Who among us here, when faced with awful circumstances, hasn't turned to question God: *"Why me?" "What have I done?" "Does God care?"*

It's not that it's bad to ask such questions. It's partly how we work through what we are experiencing. It's how we test the depth and boundaries of our sadness and grief. It's how we give voice to a pain that may be unspeakable. Sometimes when I meet with people

who are going through something terrible, they wonder if it's okay to be angry at God. They'll say, *"I'm so angry at God, but I shouldn't be, right?"* And I say, *"God can take your anger and your hurt; God would sooner that you speak with them honestly about how you feel rather than about how you are supposed to behave."*

What I have learned in the most difficult times of my life is not that God should have prevented them, but that God redeems them. There is no formula to follow that will give us the benefit of a pain free life. There's no special prayer to be said, there's no magical number of times you need to come to worship, it won't help if you memorize the Bible, it won't make a difference if you never give a penny of offering or faithfully tithe, it won't even make a difference whether you know anything about God or not. Life, and all its fullness, comes to each one of us. Following Christ is not like signing up for some sort of life insurance policy.

At the same time, being a person of faith can be tremendously helpful in the midst of difficulty. While people work through questions as to whether God loves them, often times people also relate to me that having faith makes difficulty easier to bear. Perhaps it's because of the deep-seated awareness that we are never truly alone, perhaps it's because of the beautiful work of the faith community that surrounds us (for example when we pray for one another or in the ministry of prayer shawls) perhaps it's because here we learn over and over about the promises and love of God. We fill up our tanks in good times so be a reservoir in times of need. We might have questions about *how* God is present with us, it's far different than feeling like we have *no* God with us.

And so, we see that the healing story in Mark's Gospel today is actually not that unique. It's not even particularly miraculous, but a story of life and community and faith. A woman is sick with a fever and the people around her care for her. That's what it should look like as a church family. Part of their care is to bring Jesus, whose ministry is to heal. Again, not unlike when we pray for one another, read the Bible together, share in communion, or like today join in

healing prayer.

Over and over, we hear of Jesus, throughout his life, pouring out grace and peace first – and asking questions later. His actions proclaim that aside from anything else “I come because of love.”

Jesus' first priority is to lift the broken-hearted, heal the sick, return sight to the blind, cast out demons – you name it – he pays attention to those who are “down and out” for any reason. He comes to proclaim good news that hope and trust might be renewed. He heals so that communities may be whole and well by breaking down barriers that make some “outsiders” and others “in.” He comes not to perform memorable, miraculous, spectacular deeds, but to enter our everyday, regular lives.

When we hear such beautiful accounts of Christ's love being enacted, they become the groundwork for understanding Jesus. Knowing these stories is important because it's not “if,” but *when* we doubt Christ's love or *when* we feel lost and don't know where to turn, then we can draw from them like a deep well.

Does God love us? Yes, absolutely. 100%.

Our healing comes in restored trust in that love. Healing isn't necessarily in removal of the pain we endure, but in transcending it. If God knows the names of each and every star the way the Psalmist says, then God surely knows you and I and all that life brings our way.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*

Thanks be to God, who is our balm of healing. May we continue to find hope in the promise of love. Amen.