“What if?”

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Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

June 11, 2023

***Genesis 12:1-9***

***12Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” 4So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, 6Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. 9And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.***

***Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26***

***9As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. 10And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 12But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” 18While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” 19And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. 20Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, 21for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” 22Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. 23When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, 24he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. 25But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. 26And the report of this spread throughout that district.***

*A Stone for a Pillow* (Madeleine L’Engle), *The Red Tent* (Anita Diamant)*, The Book of Longings* (Sue Monk Kidd), and *Sarah Laughed* (Vanessa Ochs)*,* are but a few of the books that are fictionalized renderings of biblical stories and go far beyond their biblical context. Well researched, these books use our imaginations to round out the setting, explore relationships, and bring the stories to life. *A Stone for a Pillow* gets its title from the story of Saul wrestling with an angel on the road to Emmaus and getting a new name, Paul. *The Red Tent* gets its title from the custom of the time, requiring women to be outside of their home during their time of menstruation and so stayed in a tent with other women; the book explores the heroines of these times, and the sisterhood that would have been built while in the tent. *The Book of Longings* is the story of Jesus as told from Mary’s perspective, beginning from when Mary was a young girl, and fills in the time of Jesus’ young adult life that is not known, and beyond his death even – all from Mary’s point of view. I’ve heard some scholarly lectures about the life of Christ that have actually mentioned this book and how well researched and plausible the fictionalized account is. And finally *Sarah Laughed* is a fictionalized version of when Sara overheard God making promises to Abram like the old testament reading for today. God promising Abram to make of him a great nation, and later, promising that Abram will have offspring as numerous as the stars – Sarah perhaps laughing at the implausibility of it all. She and Abram were already so old! All of these promises for Abram and Sarai seemed impossible to envision! How could they ever happen? The odds would seem insurmountable.

But, this is God we’re talking about, so we’re kind of ready to accept these kinds of ancient miracles. Jesus, the Messiah, the fulfillment of all of the ancient prophecies, continued working miracles that addressed seemingly unlikely, improbable and impossible.

In the Matthew scripture for today, we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of lots of miracle stories. Beginning in chapter 8, the gospel of Matthew brings us miracles of healing. They’re healings, in the lines before today’s reading, of the healing of a man with leprosy as well as two demon-possessed men. Coming in the text just after the Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, all of “the healings depict the compassion and mercy toward others demanded by Jesus in his sermon.”1

Jesus reaches people by calling them, sitting with them, and by touching and being touched by them. And by “people” we mean everyone. Jesus called Matthew for instance. A tax collector, someone who is a part of the system, part of the empire. Usually when we mention any part of The Empire, we are talking about how Jesus was fighting against the empire. But here, that tax collector Matthew, he is asked to “follow me” and Matthew does just that. Matthew follows Jesus to the house where they eat and many other tax collectors join them. Tax collectors and sinners. Some texts say “tax collectors and other sinners” putting tax collectors in the same category as sinners. And then he sat with them, with Matthew and his fellow tax collectors.

Let’s take a look at the variety of people Jesus heals just in today’s text. If we were to guess who Jesus heals, we would probably remember healings of outcasts, underdogs, people who are powerless, people on the bottom rung of the social ladder. When we try to see Jesus’ relevance for us today, we look forward to these kinds of healings where Jesus turns the normal ways of society upside down.

One thing that distinguishes today’s reading from many other lines of scripture is that this collection of 14 lines of text from Matthew are healings of all kinds. The mercy and compassion Jesus has for us crosses every line in society and every social norm.

First there’s the leader of the synagogue, someone who would have a lot of importance in his community, desperately coming to Jesus to help save his dying daughter. This desperate dad, at the top of the social order has a dire acute need for the impossible. He has faith, that Jesus is the one to come to for hope and for help.

On the way to the leader’s house, he is touched by a woman who is probably not even on the social ladder at all. Her need is chronic and complicated and has been impossible to heal. She too has faith though, that Jesus is the one to come to for hope and for help.

The other character in the story, the crowds – the tax collectors who eat with Matthew and Jesus, the crowd around Jesus who can’t prevent the woman from stretching out and touching even just Jesus’ clothing; “the flute players and the crowd making a commotion” (those flute players!) when Jesus arrives at the leader’s house because the funeral has already begun – those “others” on the sidelines around these healings, didn’t share that faith; they don’t share that faith that the impossible can be overcome; they mocked Jesus. They laughed at him.

But the woman’s bleeding stopped. Jesus touched the little girl and told her to get up. Jesus never asked who the woman was and what her life story was, or blame the victim by suggesting her suffering was some how justified; Jesus didn’t ask whether the leader of the synagogue was one of the leaders fighting against Jesus and his followers. Jesus *does not ask if we deserve to be healed.* Jesus does not have a form for us to fill out in triplicate before he will be at our side. Jesus is eager, and available, to provide healing.

*We* however, might ask questions first as we seek to see how much our assistance will cost us; will cost our organization; will I have to work too hard; will my community suffer; will this assistance use up too many of our resources; we play God as we try to decide who gets and who doesn’t. I mean, I get it in a way. I had a friend once who used to say, “When there’s no more chocolate, there’s no more chocolate!”

Of course, we’re not really talking about chocolate. We’re talking about a living wage, healthcare, the freedom to be black and brown and walk where you want to walk, wear a hoodie if you want, shop without being followed around the store; the freedom to be a member of the queer community and get the healthcare you need, dress the way you want to dress, love who you want to love; the freedom to expect that your children and grand children will have an earth with breathable air, greenery and fauna, oceans and lakes, a livable planet; the freedom to learn and be taught complete stories – stock stories *and* concealed stories, to be critical in our thinking; the freedom to trust our leaders, to feel safe from cunning maneuvers meant to diminish us.

Who are you in today’s scripture? Are you Matthew – working a job so you can take care of your family, but wondering if it’s a good job? Are you the leader of the synagogue – people look to you for their time of need, you’ve got resources on your side, doing pretty well for yourself, and yet really you’re just a parent with a child near death and your tears are just like anyone else’s. Are you the woman suffering from severe bleeding – a hard working person, feeling on the outside of society, suffering because no one wants to talk to you or touch you as if your depression or cancer or invisible disease is catching? Maybe you’re the little girl – you thought you were dead as life and love left you; no more playing with your friends, no more dreaming under your favorite tree, no more bedtime stories, but suddenly, there you are standing and walking!

I would love to know what each character did after their encounter with Jesus turned their life completely upside down. If we wrote a fictionalized version of this reading today, what would we imagine? A family, thrilled to have a second chance with their daughter, teaches her what they have learned – that societies hierarchies do not determine the love of God; they do not determine a predictable future; the love of God changes us enough to pass along the compassion, and she becomes a nurse or doctor, or a healer, or a spiritual director, or a dancer.

The woman who finally stopped living her days tied to her own personal Red Tent, forever ostracized, finally finds a group of friends who learn from her, how to be compassionate knowing that we never know how someone may be suffering.

Matthew, who finds a new job as a tax accountant since he’s got the background for it, and helps people invest in social justice organizations so that people can live their fullest lives.

I’m going to invite us all to take maybe five or six whole minutes to use our imagination.

You can close your eyes if you want, or stare at the ceiling or the floor.

Pretend you’re sitting in church. (Oh look, you are!) You’re just resting.

Let your mind wander. Don’t worry about doing this exercise right, or wonder what some answer really is. Just wander in your mind. As your mind wanders, you find yourself coming back to one particular thought, and you just can’t shake it. Maybe it’s a question? Maybe it’s a word? Maybe it’s an image?

What is that?

As you sit, you feel someone come and sit next to you quietly.

After a moment, without even looking really, you know that it’s Jesus.

What would it be like to share that one particular thought with Jesus?

Much like Matthew, or the woman suffering, or the desperate dad, or even the child, Jesus touches you. He takes you by the hand and says “come with me.”

Whenever you’re ready, you can come back to the room and open your eyes slowly.

Now I invite you to move around and gather in groups of two or three or four, and share this experience with someone if you want.

What was this like?

Where did Jesus take you?

What did you do next?

Go ahead and take a few minutes. I’ll close us by introducing the next hymn.

1Nave, Jr., Guy D., Feasting on the Word Commentary, Year A, Vol. 3, p.117