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Epiphany 4

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“Does God Care?”

(Luke 4:40)

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“Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them” (Lk. 4:40).

COLLECT: Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

A few weeks ago a life-long friend of mine called. We went to the same schools and the same church, from nursery school all the way through UW-Madison. As teenagers we thought we were pretty cool and counter cultural because we both loved jazz: Oscar Peterson, Count Basie, a group called Matrix. His parents had an outstanding stereo and we loved to test its edges until the bass made our intestines vibrate. But we also spent quieter days together, exploring the marsh around Delavan in a canoe, always with a cooler full of mountain dew and chips and Snickers, a gastronomical catastrophe but we loved it. We still talk a couple of times a year, and see one another now and then, so I was pleased to see his name show up on my phone. When he said, “Hi Dave” I could tell something was wrong. “I have some bad news” he continued. “Sue has been diagnosed with cancer.”

He told me the story and it sounded hauntingly familiar. A discovered lump followed by a doctor’s exam. Encouraging words from the doc who said, “I really don’t think it’s anything to worry about but we’ll check just to confirm.” A wash of relief, but days later the report came back with ominous results. Such was the pattern that developed. The next test, the next exam, the next scan, encouraging words, “If you must have cancer, this is the kind you want.” A wash of relief, followed by deep disappointment. Now they’re talking double mastectomy, radiation, chemo, the whole shebang . . . and an uncertain future.

At some point, I asked him if friends and acquaintances had been forwarding him the cancer fighting diets found on the internet, diets that the big pharmaceutical companies don’t want you to know about because they’re so effective . . .

. extreme diets that limit you to eating only one or two cancer fighting super foods . . . the lemon juice diet, the asparagus diet, sprinkling grated ginger on everything. Rob chuckled and said, “Yep . . . got ‘em all.”

I figured he called because he wanted to hear some Christian encouragement from a friend who happened to be a pastor. So that’s what I started to do. Not far in he interrupted, and rather apologetically said, “Dave, I really wasn’t calling for pastoral counsel. I just wanted to talk to someone who would understand.” I had forgotten an old rule of thumb for pastors, (for anyone, actually), a four word mandate from one of my seminary profs: “Shut up and listen.”

Sooner or later, serious illness comes close to each of us. It takes hold of your parent, your spouse, yourself. It is, in a sense, never expected; it comes like a thief in the night. And part of what is so surprising about illness, is how utterly unprepared we are, how shocked, stunned, angered even that our predictable, organized lives are suddenly careening out of control.

Something else is in charge: the illness, the pain. Someone else is in charge: the CNA taking your vitals in the middle of the night, the insurance company, the nameless, faceless person a hundred miles away who doesn’t know you but is reading the digital scan of your innermost secret places, and writing out a report, a report on which you have pinned many hopes and fears, a report that will probably take some time before the results are interpreted for you.

To be diagnosed with a serious illness is to enter a sort of medical gulag. The illness strips you of your independence, your freedom, your identity. It dresses you in a patient’s smock, which feels something like a prisoner’s jumpsuit. Colorful plastic bands are placed on your wrist with the assumption that you will not always have your wits about you, to tell the white coats your name, date of birth, and what risks you bring with you.

And then there are the theological questions, questions that many haven’t worked through. Does God

care? Or, to put it another way, if God loves me, and God is all-powerful, then why am I sick? Why does it feel as if he has deserted me? Why is he so quiet? Does God care?

Our text from the Gospel of St. Luke takes place at the very beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. One Sabbath, as the sun sets in the little village of Capernaum, the people start to gather outside the home of Simon Peter where Jesus is. They are bringing their sick, their little babies who are struggling to thrive, their old ones fighting for breath, their crippled ones, and the ones with symptoms no one understands. They come now because the Sabbath is over so they are allowed to bear their burdens. They come because they have already heard about how he healed the man in the synagogue earlier in the day, and how he healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

They come with assumptions, with the assumption that they must have done something to deserve their illnesses. At the very least God is testing them, disciplining them, consuming their dross with fire. They come wondering whether this Jesus do anything for them. Will he care?

And so they come to Jesus in the cool of the early evening and he meets them, talks to them, listens to them about their illnesses and their fears and worries. He takes them seriously. And then he touches them, lays his hands on them, every one of them, and quietly heals them. Of what, precisely, we don't know, nobody took pictures, and Luke doesn't bother with those details. But the sense of the text is that it's not a loud and chaotic moment. The sense of it is a quiet moment, when frightened, anxious, oftentimes isolated, lonely, desperate people are touched by his hand that conveys something of the love and grace and healing of God.

Sometimes when we're sick God seems so quiet, so absent, so far away, and it makes us wonder whether he's listening or not. It makes us question if he might be indifferent to our suffering. As the illness lingers on, drags on . . . there are setbacks and chain reactions . . . the dysfunction of this organ is affecting that organ, the potency of this medicine is causing that unbalance . . . as the illness

lingers and confounds your doctors, it's easy to grow fearful and discouraged and question whether God really cares.

When you're sick, don't ponder the unknown mysteries of God, such as why he permits bad things to happen to good people. When you're sick, ponder what God has revealed about himself through Christ. Ponder the known things, the things we can be sure of, what we know about Jesus and can cling to, such as his compassion, love and mercy for the sick.

Remember when the disciples were caught out in the middle of the sea by a great big storm? They thought they were going to die. Yet Jesus was in the back of the boat sleeping. They shake him awake and shout at him. "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" (We all ask that when we're really sick.) Jesus first rebukes the wind and the waves, and quiets them, and then he rebukes his disciples. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Notice, it's easier for Jesus to quiet the forces of nature than it is for him to quiet the human heart. The storm shows a greater recognition and submission to His Word and authority than do his disciples. Apparently, sin, doubt and unbelief have a way of robbing us of the peace he would give us.

When you're really sick, (or someone you love), when you're in the middle of the storm, it's going to feel like Jesus is sleeping in the back of the boat again, and it will frighten you. Hear again his words to his followers. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have you no faith?" Do not mistake his silence as sleepy indifference.

Does God care? Don't ponder the unknowns. Look at what we know with a certainty. Look at our text and see how Jesus interacted with those people of Capernaum. See how he laid his hands on them, every one of them. No illness is too big or too complicated or too gross for him, nor does he exclude any of them for who they are or what they've done.

Does God care? See how he laid strong, healing hands on those people in Capernaum, and see how he laid

those same hands on the cross for the healing of the world. He's there to forgive our sins and give us eternal life. And though we still get sick and die, we don't have to do that as those with no faith and no clue as to where we're going. Jesus spares us that greatest of anxieties by winning salvation for us on the cross and giving it to us. In place of fear, he gives us certainty.

Therefore, after the funeral, at the cemetery, we gather under a tent, and the immediate family sits in cloth covered folding chairs in front of the casket. It's called the committal, and it's a beautiful little liturgy polished by the centuries. It's all Gospel out there. No need for the Law, not there, not sitting in front of a casket and surrounded by all those tombstones. The liturgy begins simply with the reading of some strong promises of the Lord. One from Job: "I know my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God." Then follows one from Romans which ends with: "So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." And then another from John: "I am the resurrection and the life" Jesus said. "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." It's such a pleasure to read those words at the cemetery, they are well worn words, the tongue doesn't get tripped up on them. And when everything else is uncertain for those sitting in the chairs, (if you'll ever feel normal again and be truly happy again, whether or not you'll be able to keep the house, if your friends will still want to be with you now that it's just you), when everything else is uncertain, what a gift that God has given us this certainty in Christ. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" the liturgy says, "in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body." And again, "Receive our thanks for the victory over death and the grave that He won for us. Keep us in everlasting communion with all who wait for Him on earth and with all in heaven, who are with Him."

Does God care? Look at how he cared for those in Capernaum. And look how he stretched out his hands on the cross for us and our salvation. And try to imagine heaven. It is so unlike anything on earth. God's Word (limited by human language) says more about what heaven is not. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes" Revelation says, "and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain. . ." No congested lungs, no crippling arthritis, no HMO's, HSA's, deductibles, co-pays . . . in heaven those words don't even exist.

Does God care when we are sick? Look at those whom God sends us when we're sick: all those medical professionals. Luther calls them "masks of God." God uses them as his instruments, his ministers of healing and relief.

It's true. Some docs and nurses have surrendered their vocation, their sense of God-given mission and have become mere hirelings. Some doctors don't get involved or worry about basic compassion and caring. They think of that as the nurse's turf. No excuse for doctors who cannot get involved that way. But the vast majority I've met are skilled and compassionate and conscientious, and, at their very best . . . at their very best they remind us a little of the Good Physician in Capernaum. Some are unforgettable in that way.

Does God care? Look at those whom God sends to care for us, the medical professionals, but also friends and family members, people from church with their grandma's casserole in hand, or a prayer shawl they knit, or just a warm smile. . . the Stephen Ministers who will come, if you make the request, to listen to you without judging you. They will offer a safe place to vent, and will pray for you, and maybe even give good insights and helpful feedback. God uses them too, expresses his care through them.

As long as we are talking about caring visits, it distresses me when I hear: "Pastor, I had surgery a couple weeks ago. I thought about calling you but you're so busy, I didn't want to bother you." We hear that a lot. But we want you to let us know. Maybe you don't want us to visit. We promise we will not stay long. And we will not speak in tongues, nor try

to convert your agnostic sister, nor pray in such a way that people down the hall will know that your colon is all twisted up and blocked. Please call us. Seeing you when you are sick is an important part of what we do.

And when we come, we will read one of those wonderful Gospel passages, because we figure you're already feeling the sting of the Law. And we will also offer the Lord's Supper, not because we think you have one foot in the grave, but because what is good for the spirit is also good for the body. And because "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation." And because Jesus promised, "This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." And because this Supper joins you into that one communion of the saints on earth and the saints in heaven (1 Cor. 10:17ff).

Rob ended our phone conversation with a beautiful confession. "I know Sue is safe, and I know I'm safe too, and the kids, because of Him." I told him, "I love you Rob and know that I'll be praying for you and Sue." He said, "I love you too, and have been praying for you and Gail and the kids."

Sooner or later, you and I have a personal encounter with serious illness, and because we are who we are, we will ask the question, "Does God care?" He cared for those people in Capernaum. He cared for you when he stretched out his hands on the cross. And when you're sick, he'll surround you with caring, compassionate people.

Does God care? Yes, God does care. Amen.