

Life Worth Living 3: Health and Faith

Isaiah 35, Mark 6:1-6, Ephesians 4:1-6 by Patty Friesen (Aug 4/24)

In our call to worship, both the tone and the substance of Isaiah 35 proclaim the good news of God's care for the people of God. Those who experience their lives as exile, those who pass through a wilderness, those who are weak may shout for joy, for God will transform all things. Furthermore, it is even possible that the proclamation of such good news may have the power to transform ordinary lives and the realities of the world. Behind this text, however, lie troubling realities. Those to whom it was and is addressed have not yet seen sorrow and sighing flee away (35:10). There are "weak hands" that need to be strengthened, "feeble knees" that must be made firm, "fearful" hearts that need courage and encouragement (35:3-4). Every reader of every generation knows that all these, and more, are persistent human realities. That fact helps explain the longing for the end to sighing and sorrow, if not in this world then in the world to come. How do we balance the announcement of God's good news with the acknowledgment that suffering persists?

In Mark's gospel, villagers commonly resent those who attempt to elevate their position above that to which they are entitled by birth. The attempt by Jesus' family to stop his wandering and public preaching in 3:21 implies that from the perspective of the village, Jesus was thought to be dishonoring his family. The comments attributed to the townspeople remind us of an important fact about Jesus: He was a real human being. He had spent much of his adult life at a trade, working with stone. Some scholars even surmise that he might have spent time working on building the magnificent Gentile cities, like Sepphoris, that were not far from his village. Jesus did not overwhelm people

as though he were a larger-than-life action hero. If you were to meet Jesus at Levi's dinner or on the job, Jesus would appear to be just another human being. Faith overcomes the scandal of the ordinary appearance of Jesus when it recognizes that God's healing power comes to humanity through him. But what is the role of faith?

In Amanda Held Opelt's book *Holy Unhappiness: The Myth of the Blessed Life*, she counters the idea of a blessed Christian life of health. The belief that if you believe in God, God will prosper you, which is called the prosperity gospel, emerged in the late nineteenth century as a mix-and-match doctrine of New Thought philosophy and Pentecostalism. The New Thought philosophy emphasized the power of the mind to achieve success and affluence. Followers of New Thought believed positive thinking could lead to wealth and prayers for restoration could lead to health. Most of today's popular self-help books are ideological descendants of this movement. Theirs is the staunch insistence that we can control our outcomes by our own efforts, self-confidence and optimism.

New Thought began to influence Pentecostals with its emphasis on the individual's personal relationship with God and the power of divine healing embraced the notion that great faith can accomplish great things in our lives. Spreading not only through Pentecostal churches, but evangelical ones as well, was the idea that God desires of us to be healthy and happy and that we are entitled to blessing. The abundant life can be achieved through the power of positive thinking and faith. You are capable of great things if you only believe in yourself and God. Suffering is a result of a negative mindset or lack of faith in yourself and God. It is an ideology that pairs well with the modern wellness movement and the live-high-off-the-hog North American lifestyles.

Being raised in the Mennonite Church, we emphasized that God was with us in adversity and sickness. They were not a sign of failure on part of faith or lack of favour on God's part. We never felt entitled to affluence and always believed that God was good even when our circumstances were not. Yet while we didn't expect God to grant us health and wealth, God was certainly supposed to grant us emotional and spiritual prosperity - fulfillment in the work of service, purpose in suffering and martyrdom.

The idea that God would actually make us happy seeped in through other Christian media like evangelical books, Amy Grant music and hand-lettered phrases on wall decor like - I'm too blessed to be stressed. God won't give me more than I can handle. Everything happens for a reason. Just let go and let God. Pray more; worry less. We had also had little songs in Sunday school to emphasize the theme of emotional and spiritual prosperity - "The joy of the Lord, is my strength...He fills my mouth with laughter - ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." That if we only believed enough - we'd be laughing all day long. God wants to make me happy - and if I make good choices and get a good job that's in line with God's will for my life - I'll be always happy in my 40 year career - ha, ha, ha, ha, ha and if I marry God's choice for my life and have lots of kids - I'll be happy - ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. Why wouldn't I want to follow God with this kind of promise of blessing and happiness for the rest of my life? It's a package deal of conditions and assurances - if I do this for God - God will do this for me.

In the words of Amanda Held Opelt, "I no longer believe that my sadness makes me a failure at faith, that my restlessness means I'm out of touch with God. The notion that if I am good then my experiences and my feels will always be good is a myth. Life is hard no matter how many good choices you make. People die and disasters befall us,

certainly. But even in small daily afflictions: work is wearisome, relationships are frustrating and even in all our spiritual disciplines of prayer, journaling, praying - God can sometimes feel absent. Life often demands more of us than we know how to give. We are not as strong as our life circumstances require us to be. Simply being human is a rigorous endeavour but no one really wants that hand-lettered and hanging on their wall. (p.xxi)

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher is famously quoted, "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Nietzsche was the youngest professor of philosophy in the University of Basel at age 24 but had to resign due to health issues. For most of his life, Nietzsche weathered blinding migraine headaches and relentless nausea. He was incapacitated by pain for weeks at a time. If his physical pain wasn't enough burden to bear - he suffered rejection, betrayal and the breaking of most of the meaningful relationships in his life. So it was not entirely without reason that Nietzsche thought of himself as someone who could speak from experience on suffering and how to live with and through it. He saw his life as a large struggle to make meaning of illness and suffering.

God doesn't give us suffering, Nietzsche would say but suffering is baked naturally into life, as is joy and beauty. The decisive thing is not to get rid of suffering or to avoid it but to learn to take it and grow from it. Yet Nietzsche pushes beyond making meaning of one's own suffering to trying to understand the suffering of the whole world, "this monstrous sum of all kinds of grief," as he calls it. In itself suffering is senseless. The challenge is to live so thoroughly, profoundly and irrepressibly as to *make* sense of it.

At age 44, Nietzsche suffered a collapse and afterward a complete loss of his mental faculties, with paralysis and probably vascular dementia. He lived his remaining years in the care of his mother until her death and then with his sister Elisabeth. Nietzsche died at age 55, after experiencing pneumonia and multiple strokes. His life was short and full of chronic pain and yet he had a huge impact in using his life experience of suffering to affirm others' life experiences of suffering. There is no wall stenciling about that.

Last summer at a family reunion a beloved American auntie showed up with a shirt with *Blessed* embossed across it. I love this auntie because she's always been fun and positive. We share the same name and personality disposition. She too is a 7 on the Enneagram which as we will study in church this fall means that we are motivated by fun and living in the moment and avoiding pain at all cost. I appreciate that she sees her life in that framework as being blessed. It's true that she is blessed. She has a beautiful acreage, beautiful children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and is healthy and wealthy and has never lost a family member pre-maturely.

We were at the family reunion with an uncle who had cancer who had been given a few months to live. At breakfast at the hotel, she cooed in her smooth Southern accent, "I just know God wants to heal Rick." I was shocked at her denial and I tentatively said, "I think God wants to heal him too but I also believe God will be with us even if he dies. We wanted God to heal Aunt Joyce from cancer also but she died so I think we have to prepare ourselves to balance hope and reality." Things got quiet after that.

My immediate family's experience holds both sickness and healing and sickness and death. My dad died at age 63 with Parkinson's. There was no healing there despite years of prayers. And Mom, as you all know, miraculously rose from her death bed of sepsis and COVID two years ago to live a happy fulfilled life at Bethany Manor. I've learned there are no guarantees in life of health and faith.

A friend recently wrote on Facebook: Tonight it hit me how much my physical limitations really are. Prior to the accident, practically nothing stopped me; I was a doer. After the accident, it seems like practically everything stops me; little I can do. The tears wouldn't stop flowing until I talked it out. I was told that what I am experiencing is "grief over the loss of my body". So true. I am mourning over the loss of the body I once had and will most likely never fully get back again. Oh, how I miss it so very much.

She continues, "three time Apostle Paul asked for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. No amount of prayer or trusting in the Lord or feeling blessed gives us desired results. I've found that just to live the life I am given as best I can, putting one foot in front of the other, wrestling with God and leaning on others along the way has to be enough - for me. I don't think that's a lack of faith - I think it's a deeper, more honest faith where I don't need God to behave in certain ways and God doesn't need me to behave in certain ways either. God and I co-exist in peacefulness and gratitude most days." (J.Y. on FB Spring 2024)

In our reading from Ephesians 4 the exhortation to "lead a life worthy of [your] calling" or a life worth living as echoed in the Beatitudes. God's calling is to create a people who live in the paths of justice and truth, in a spirit of meekness, patience,

generous compassion, eternal goodness. There is nothing in scripture about guarantees of health dependent on our degree of faith. It's about trust in something bigger and more loving in the absence of health, wealth and happiness.

Let us pray...Healing God, you have created a path for us based on trust and not on guarantees or insurances against pain and suffering. Help us to walk that path. It's easy when we are healthy but less so when we are not, so give us the daily strength we need to find our way. Amen.