

So far in Luke's gospel, Jesus has healed up close and personal. He has walked into the room of Peter's mother-in-law who was sick with fever, and raised her up. He has healed a leper by the laying on of hands. He has welcomed masses of sick people, who pressed so closely against him they almost smothered him.

But Luke lets us know that the healing power of Jesus went beyond his immediate presence. He didn't have to be in the same location as the person in need. Jesus could heal well beyond how far he saw. And his voice was so powerful it even reached the ears of the dead. According to these stories, Jesus can reach anywhere to do his healing work.

He certainly didn't need to be close to the centurion's slave. (A centurion was a Roman officer in charge of about 100 soldiers.) While Jesus was still far away, the centurion said, "Don't bother coming any closer. I understand how this works. I, too, am under authority. When I say go, the soldiers in my care go; and when I say come along, they come along. So just say the word, Jesus, and my slave will be healed." The army officer wasn't bragging by the way. He knew that the only power he had came from his position as a Roman officer. Without Rome behind him, he could do nothing. His soldiers obeyed because of who he represented, not because of any power he had in himself.

That's how the power of Jesus works, according to the officer. Except Jesus had much greater power because Jesus represented God. The centurion already made up his mind who was boss, and it wasn't himself. So he told Jesus not to worry about coming to his house. The centurion didn't feel worthy to stand in his presence anyway. He trusted that when Jesus spoke it was like God speaking. No matter where Jesus was, one word from him, and the slave whom the centurion loved would turn well.

Jesus doesn't have to be right up next to somebody. He can heal from a distance. That's because his power comes from God, who has poured out the renewing Spirit everywhere, so that whatever time or place we live in we're close enough to receive help. We have never seen Jesus. But he has long arms and a strong voice. He can reach us across the gaps of space and time.

I wonder if you feel what I sometimes feel: a long, harsh distance between God and myself. The universe is so vast, and we are so small, it's easy to feel lost within it. We can thank astrophysics for letting human beings know that we're not the center of the cosmos, a good check on our egos. But with a universe so large, and the possibility of it being even larger, layers of universes making up a multiverse, God seems pushed farther and farther away, and we can feel so insignificant and alone. The

stars are beautiful at night; they also haunt us with the fear of too much distance between heaven and earth.

But these stories in Luke remind us that we're talking about God here, who isn't one more thing in the universe way off on the edges, but the Creator of it, however large and complex it is. And the same God who transcends space and time is also as close as our breath, permeating all that he has created and giving it life. Jesus represented God's pervasive presence across the whole creation, and he tapped into it. With Jesus working for us, we're never too far away from God to be helped.

In the present day, Jesus very often heals through other people. He doesn't often use fireworks. He prefers ordinary means to restore us to health. Doctors and nurses are his agents, as well as the medicines they give us and the pharmacists who are careful with them. Hospitals, after all, were started by Christian communities, and those who founded them were motivated to get into the healing business because of the Lord they followed.

Jesus also heals through counselors and friends who are strong for us when we are so weak. I bet almost every one of us had a minister who took us by the hand and bandaged our wounds with grace, or a parent who shored up our broken confidence when we fell on our faces, or a therapist who stood with us in our anguish and kissed us with peace, or a friend who listened and

listened and listened some more until we talked our way out of the pain. This is a broken world with a lot of sharp edges. Through others, the love of Jesus has come to us to stop the bleeding. And we are so grateful for them.

But let's not overlook that Jesus also works in ways beyond our understanding. The healing he offers is a mystery. And the best attitude toward a mystery is to stand in awe rather than to try to explain. Even now, hidden from view, his wheels are turning to make all things new. Before a prayer is on our lips, he's busy working in our favor, recreating us from our disasters. He knows our need even better than we do, and in the silence, he moves with the power of God. We ought to give him a shout out, an amen and a hallelujah. Wherever we are, through ordinary means and extraordinary means, he gets to us with healing in his wings.

Yes, we believe this or we want to believe it, but we can't help but ask a few questions. Like the centurion, some of us have prayed for those we loved, but healing did not come. Why are some healed and others remain in misery? We've also asked that those dear to us be spared from death, but the end came, in some cases way too soon before our loved one had a chance at a full life. Why do some die well before their time? These are good questions, and we are free to ask them. Part of maturing is being willing to ask them, to face the shadows at the edge of certainty.

I don't have answers for you. I don't know why some die too early and others we pray for aren't healed. We speculate of course. Maybe the person isn't healed because they need to learn something. Well, I believe we do learn a lot through our suffering, thanks be to God, but I have a hard time believing God makes us or leaves us sick just to teach us a lesson. Maybe the person died early to be spared a worse fate later. It's possible that a death now avoids a worse death in the future. But again, who knows, and if God has that kind of power, why not use it to help us avoid the more troubling death up ahead? As far as I can tell, the answers we often hear to explain the unexplainable may do more harm than good. We have to ask the questions – no shame in that. But then, I think it's most wise to learn to live with the questions unanswered, trusting that God can bend even our worst experiences toward the good.

Luke assures us that Jesus' power to save extends well beyond his immediate presence. Luke doesn't answer why some aren't healed. But he does go one step farther. Luke tells us, even if death comes, Jesus has power to overcome it. He raised the widow's son. That's our sign.

The poor widow of Nain was desperate. Having lost her husband and having lost her son, she was homeless, potentially destitute unless another relative took her in. Jesus had compassion

on her. He stopped the funeral procession, and with a love not of this world, reached through death and brought back her son to her. Now we know. Not even death will drive enough distance between us and God. The arms of Jesus go all the way to hell and back. You're not wrong to put your trust in him.

When you think about it, all healings are temporary. All the players in today's stories have died: the widow as well as her son; the centurion and his servant; the Jewish elders who encouraged Jesus to help the centurion; the crowd in the funeral procession. Eventually, something catches up with us, even if it's old age. We need a savior who can heal us not only now, but later; not only in this life, but in the next. Well, we have one. His name is Jesus, once dead himself and now alive forevermore. You wouldn't be wrong to put your trust in him.

If you call out to Jesus, I think he'll hear you. If you are willing to show him however you are sick, wounded or broken, I think he'll respond. He may heal you completely. But even if he doesn't, I bet he will make you well, better than you were. His power isn't locked up in the past far away. You'd be on the right track if you put your trust in him.

We had to go to a hard funeral. A college friend, dearly loved, sweet, smart and gifted. She was too young. Cancer. We learned at the funeral that someone had read to her from one of the

Psalms shortly before she died. The psalm said that those who put their trust in God would be healed, that their lives would be brought up from the pit and their health and well-being restored. When our friend heard those words, she turned to the reader and said, "That's talking about me beyond this life." Her friends had been right behind her. Her church had prayed and prayed and prayed. They filled her last days with love and support. And when she died, she had hope. Not cured, but mysteriously well, and on her way to resurrection. It made a difference for her to put her trust in him.

Karl Barth said that whenever the Word of God is preached, Jesus walks up and down the aisles of the church. That close. So far away, and yet able to reach us right here, right now. Why not let him see how your sick, your wounds, whatever in you is broken? You know he wants to make you well. You would be right to put your trust in him.