



## Stories of Healing

Discussion Booklet

2021-2022

### **Respectful Communication Guidelines**

- R – Take responsibility for what you say without blaming others
- E – Use empathic listening
- S – Be sensitive to differences in communication styles
- P – Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak
- E – Examine your own assumptions and perceptions
- C – Keep confidentiality
- T – Trust ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong

### **Mutual Invitation Process**

*From The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community by Eric H. F. Law (1993) St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.*

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

- The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Try not to invite the person next to you.
- After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share.
- If you don't want to say anything, simply say "pass" or "pass for now" and proceed to invite another to share.
- Do this until everyone has been invited.
- If anyone said "pass for now," invite them again to share.
- After everyone has had an opportunity to share, then you may ask questions or ask for clarification.

## **Guidelines for the Study**

- The Bible passages and readings are the focus of this study, not the leader of the group.
- We are not here to debate who has the right interpretation but we are here to read and listen together and share our insights.
- Our leaders are not experts. They are but facilitators who will lead us through a process by which the inspiration from the Scripture can be shared and celebrated. However a leader might bring in historical, literary, and contextual information to help the group understand the text better.
- We are all equals before the Scripture: therefore no one needs to feel disadvantaged. We invite you to adopt a “beginners mind”, so that every time we approach a text, we would hear it as is for the first time.
- Because we seek insights and not just information, it is essential that everyone join in the discussion and that no one person dominates.
- We invite you to hold the personal information shared here in confidence because only in this way can we feel free to say what is on our minds and in our hearts.

## **Discussion Resource**

The Holy Bible – each person should have a Bible

## Introduction To Stories of Healing

**Note.** During the Lenten season of 2021, Nick Tangen organized a bible study series around the theme, “Stories of Healing”. Since Nick was leaving for a new job, he asked people to sign up and lead a session of the bible study. Nick provided a list of bible stories to guide potential leaders. We only discussed three of those stories. I would like to continue the conversation with some of the healing stories that were not chosen for Lent.

What is the purpose of these “stories of healing”? Let me suggest the purpose in four statements:

1. To reveal who God is (or to reveal Jesus as God’s son)
2. To identify that the healer/messenger is sent by God and speaks God’s word in truth
3. To show God’s compassion for the people who are sick (or dead)
4. To bring the one healed (or those who witness the healing) into a right relationship with God

Let’s look for these themes in our lessons.

**Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath.** The larger context for this lesson is a prolonged drought to punish Ahab, the King of Israel, for worshipping Baal instead of God (1 Kings 17:1). Elijah announces the drought to Ahab and then goes into hiding. God sends him to a foreigner, the widow of Zarephath. God miraculously feeds the widow, her son, and Elijah through the drought. When the widow’s son becomes severely ill, Elijah prays to God and God heals the son. The widow says, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” (17:24)

**Jesus Heals A Paralytic.** Jesus and the religious authorities are in a fight to win the hearts of the people. When a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus by his friends, Jesus sees their faith. They believe that Jesus has the power to heal their friend. Jesus says to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus is announcing to the scribes that he has the divine power to forgive sins. Jesus wants the paralyzed man to be in a right relationship with God, spiritually as well as physically. To prove Jesus has the power to forgive sins, he says, “Stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.” When the man does stand up, fully healed, the people are amazed. “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:12) Score one for Jesus.

**The Healing of Naaman.** Naaman is the second most powerful man in the Kingdom of Aram, but is powerless to cure the leprosy he suffers from. When Naaman learns there is a healer/prophet in Israel who could cure him, he goes to his king to get the means, “the money” to buy a cure. But, God does not operate that way, using political or economic power. God is in the business of changing hearts. God cures Naaman (through his prophet, Elisha) and asks nothing in return. That powerful witness changes Naaman’s heart, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except [Yahweh] in Israel.”

**Jesus Heals The Man Born Blind.** Jesus meets a man blind from birth. The disciples ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus has a different answer, “This man was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” When Jesus heals the man born blind, he witnesses to the truth that the Kingdom of God has come to the man, his parents, his neighbors, and the religious authorities who oppose Jesus. The man is driven out of

the synagogue by those authorities, but Jesus welcomes him into a new community of the Kingdom of God.

**Damascus Road Healings.** Saul is on a rampage to locate any disciple in Damascus who belongs to the Way and to bring them bound to Jerusalem for judgment. On the road, Saul sees a vision of the risen Christ and is forever changed. He says, "Who are you Lord?" And Jesus says, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The encounter leaves Saul blinded and in this weakened state he is led into the city. A disciple named Ananias comes and lays his hands on Saul to heal him of his blindness and Saul is baptized. What a transformation! Saul is brought into a right relationship with God and with the Christian community.

**Samaritan Woman At The Well.** Jesus makes a stop on his way through Samaria to do a little evangelizing. But Jews and Samaritans are not on speaking terms, so he needs a witness, an insider. He settles next to the town well. Here comes a Samaritan woman who has seen trouble in her life and a good skeptic. Jesus knocks down all her defenses, until the woman says, "I know that Messiah is coming..." and Jesus says, "I am he." The woman goes to tell her neighbors that she has found the Messiah and they come out to see for themselves and are convinced. The woman has come to a belief in Jesus and has gained new credibility in her community.

## **Session #1: Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath [1 Kings 17:8-24]**

**Introduction.** This story introduces the prophet Elijah into the Biblical narrative of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, during the reign of King Ahab and his queen Jezebel. Israel had been ruled by a succession of kings who were remembered as increasingly wicked in the eyes of the Lord. We read in Chapter 16 that “Ahab son of Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord more than all who were before him.” Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon who worshipped the idol Baal, the god of rain and fertility. Not only did Ahab tolerate the idolatry of his foreign wife, but becomes an active worshipper of Baal, establishing a temple and altar dedicated to Baal in Samaria, the capital city of Israel. In Chapter 17 Elijah appears on the scene and declares that there will be no rain in the land, presumably as God’s punishment for Ahab’s idolatry. The drought continues for some time across Israel and the surrounding territory. God provided for Elijah in the wilderness until God tells him what to do next, which is where our reading begins.

### **Questions.**

1. How would you describe the scene where Elijah first encounters the widow? What are the widow’s circumstances? What feelings come up for you as Elijah talks to the widow and the scene plays out?
2. What does verse 9 seem to suggest compared to what actually happens? What do you make of the difference?
3. What is the widow’s reaction when her son becomes ill and “there was no breath in him?” How does she seem to be interpreting the illness? How is this similar or different from how we interpret the cause of illness today?
4. What is at stake for each of the characters when the widow’s son “had no breath in him”? How are the stakes expressed in the widow’s words? In Elijah’s words? What is at stake for God?
5. This story serves to introduce us to Elijah as a “man of God.” Consider the widow’s perspective in the story. What did it mean for her to have a “man of God” come to stay? What does it say about being a “person of God”? What are things a person of God can expect on the road to being a faithful servant?
6. This story shows up again in an episode early in Jesus’ ministry immediately after he speaks in his hometown synagogue as a “man of God”. Read Luke 4:24-26. What do you think Jesus means by recalling this story? How did the people react to Jesus comments? Compare this reaction to the widow’s words in verse 24.
7. The widow was not from Israel, meaning that this whole episode is a witness to someone outside the faith. Yet at the end she declares “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” What might give people outside the church a reason to declare that a Christian community is “from God and who’s words speak the truth?”

**Prayer.** God of truth and grace, you come to all people in powerful and sometimes mysterious ways. Give us faith to trust even as we endure trials. Give us faith to be people of truth and compassion to those around us that your power and love would be made known. Amen

## **Session #2: Jesus Heals A Paralytic [Mark 2:2-13]**

**Introduction.** This healing of the paralytic is set in the backdrop of Mark 1:22ff, with accounts of many healings and castings out of demons. Jesus is busy not only healing, but preaching the word (everything he had to say to people about God's purposes.) People "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." In this context early one morning, his disciples find Jesus alone praying in a deserted place. They say, "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus' response is, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." Healings weren't uncommon in the days of Jesus. There were mystics and people of magic and it was expected that they would heal. Jesus kept returning to "the word" that he was spreading so that people would know that it was more than physical healing that he brought.

He had just returned home to Capernaum and was surrounded by throngs of people. The healing of the paralytic is striking in the amount of effort from friends that was required just to get him to Jesus. Jesus noted not only the individual paralytic, but saw "their" faith. Then Jesus takes the experience to another level when he declares forgiveness of sins and confronts the scribes. He makes it clear that his presence and message of "the word" are far more than magical physical healing.

### **Questions.**

1. Who are the friends that you would turn to in times of illness and crisis? (i.e., who would "carry you.")
2. Do you think illness brings us closer to God or causes more distance and doubt?
3. At times of illness/disability there is often a sense of guilt over what might have been done differently to avoid the crisis. What do you think the sins are that Jesus is forgiving?
4. Do you think of Jesus as a mind reader or does he just know human nature so well that he knew what the scribes were thinking?
5. Jesus is never entirely clear what he means by the term "Son of Man". The two common interpretations are reference to his humanness, i.e. son of humankind, or to the figure referenced in the book of Daniel. What do you think?

**Prayer.** Thank you, God, for the community that supports us and leads us to healing. Thank you Jesus for the gift of forgiveness of sins, for guilt can cause illness or can aggravate illness. The cosmic You loves us no matter in what state of brokenness we are, and for that we thank you and praise you. Amen.

### **Session #3: The Healing of Naaman [2 Kings 5:1-19a]**

**Introduction.** Alas, the story of Naaman does not fit our Lenten themes of disease as caused by sin, or even as healing as primarily restoration to community. Rather, I think this famous little vignette has more to do with how divine healing power intersects with human political power. The message, conveyed rather indirectly, seems to be that healing cannot be bought, forcibly acquired, or manipulated through gift. Rather, healing is the ultimate in ‘soft power’ (a political term), or what we would call the grace granted by a merciful God.

The prophet Elisha has been approached by Naaman, a “high commander” in the army of Aram. Naaman craves what his own exalted and powerful position has not provided him—relief from some terrible skin disease. His King is unwilling to lose him, and so throws money at the problem. He sends a huge pile (literally) of money to the King of Israel—not unlike our bent to spent large amounts of money on specialized procedures! The King of Aram assumes that such specialized healing can and must come through the powers held by the king. Presumably he believes that a king, being a king, has access to divine power. The King of Israel is somewhat different. He recognizes that he cannot refuse this coercive gift from Aram. But he knows better: kingship does not include power over disease.

Elisha resolves his problem. He utterly shatters the connection between political and divine power—the idea that money can buy healing. He directs Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan. Naaman, stuck in the assumption that healing derives from political power, resists. But once he is cured, he flips in his evident beliefs; he claims the source of his healing is Israel’s God.

This story reminds me of the Lutheran World Federation’s Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem. The hospital, atop the Mt of Olives, is threatened by land-hungry settlers and has had barely enough political power to keep from being destroyed. Ten years ago, when I visited, it offered a level of kidney care not available in Israeli hospitals. That provided a reason for the Israeli authorities to leave it open. Its survival is no doubt due at least in part to the value of the services it provides.

Perhaps the situation has changed since then, and the parallel is not perfect. But from this particularly contentious intersection of political power and healing, here is what I see as the take-home message of the story for us: healing is the ultimate in ‘soft’ power. It cannot be bought. It cannot be forcibly acquired through political power. It can only be granted by a merciful God, as a kind of grace that eludes the economy of exchange or even the economy of gift.

The story does not announce this conclusion. The King of Israel in the story did not quite get it, and I am pretty sure Naaman did not, for he felt compelled for political reasons to keep worshipping a god he now knew doesn’t exist.

We don’t know from the story why Naaman was sick in the first place. There is no concern voiced about his sinfulness, nor alienation from the community. What comes through very clearly, though, is the failure of kingly power to achieve healing. Only God can do that, and chooses to do so through the soft power of grace, mediated by a prophet who has no coercive leverage to apply.

#### **Questions.**

1. Read 5:1-5. Our text suggests that Naaman is successful at war because God was intervening on Naaman’s behalf. Why would God help a people other than Israel? What does this suggest about our author’s beliefs about God?
2. Read 5:6-7. The King of Aram assumes the King of Israel can compel Elisha to perform this healing. Do you believe the King of Israel (or any king) has this power?
3. Read 5:8-10. Does the King of Israel believe in God, or believe that Elisha is a prophet? What would the healing of Naaman suggest to the King of Israel?

4. Read 5:11-14. Why does Naaman get angry with Elisha's instructions for healing? How do Naaman's servants convince him to follow Elisha's instructions?
5. Read 5:15-16. What is Naaman's confession of faith after the healing? Why does Elisha not accept Naaman's offer of a gift?
6. Read 5:17-19a. Why does Naaman want "two mule-loads of earth" to worship God? Why does Elisha excuse Naaman when he asks for the Lord's pardon as he bows down to worship in the house of Rimmon?

**Prayer.** Dear God, We look to you for compassion, mercy, and healing. You are the one true God for every nation. Help us to seek your face. Be with us in our time of need. In Jesus name, Amen.

## Session #4: Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind [John 9:1-41]

**Introduction.** A man born blind gains his sight when Jesus makes mud from his own spittle and dirt, rubs it on the eyes, and tells the man to wash off in a pool. The disciples questioned whether the man's sin or his parents' had caused his blindness. Jesus answered (3) that it was neither; he was blind so that God's power might be seen at work in him. The healing caused a stir among neighbors, family, the Pharisees and Jewish authorities. Some believed that the healing happened, some did not, and perhaps, some were on the fence about what to believe. The man was consistent in the telling (11,15) and retelling (27) of his healing event, and was clear about what was known (25) and not known (12,25), as were his parents (20). Jesus returned and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. The healed man asked to know who he is, so that he could believe in him (36). He knelt and believed. Some Pharisees were concerned as to whether Jesus' inference was, that they were blind (40). Jesus answered (41), "If you were blind, then you would not be guilty; but since you claim [emphasis added] that you can see, this means that you are still guilty."

Themes of seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing, curiosity, questioning, humility, pride, ego and truth intersect in Jesus' healing of the man born blind.

Also, why is this man never referred to by name? Can we the readers, more easily put ourselves in this role because he remains nameless? He offers us much as a model for truth telling under pressure. Our communities need people like him. His strength of character and knack for speaking truth to power is evident (27-33). Was God's power at work in him, long before the public saw the result of the healing? Without sight, he relied on other senses to become more highly developed. Did he see with his heart, soul, conscience, and intuition? "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye," writes author Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *The Little Prince*. Christian faith at its best, sees with the heart, guided by conscience.

### Questions.

1. Compared to other readings of this story, this time did you see more? In other words, was a blind spot removed where there was one before?
2. How do you interpret the phrase, "To look with new eyes?"
3. Imagine yourself standing close to Jesus during the exchange with the formerly blind man and with the Pharisees, in 35-41. What is your gut response to: "I believe Lord!" and then he kneels; And, "Surely you don't mean that we are blind, too?"
4. What does Jesus mean by this statement, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."? Is Jesus still the light of the world?
5. Is it necessary (or even helpful) for the one who is being healed to have faith in Jesus' ability to heal them?
6. This lesson highlights the struggle between Jesus and the religious authorities (represented by the Pharisees) to win the hearts and minds of the people. Who is winning in this story? What facts in the story support your position?

**Prayer.** Dear God, Keep me humble. I pray for a *heart that sees rightly* and a mind open to what is *essential and invisible to the eye*. My hope is to see your guidance and take it. Amen.

## Session #5: Damascus Road Healings [Acts 9:1-22]

### Introduction.

#### **(Change is a constant. To say you have not changed a bit, is not a compliment.)**

“Seeing is believing”. We’ve been brought up believing (until recently) that a fact is an objective truth. From birth we are developing perspective; a way of being in relationship to our world, a way of interpreting the people, places, and ideas that we encounter that generally makes sense to us. This worldview becomes part of us. We aren't even aware of many of the assumptions that we make.

However, as it is written, “*God gave them a sluggish spirit, **eyes** that would not **see** and **ears** that would not **hear**, down **to** this very day.*” (Rom 11:8)

Jesus commented on the need to have eyes to see and ears to hear. The scenes in these texts which seem important as I look and listen are revealed in both the brokenness of the world and the healing presence of God.

*Everyone in this story is required to look again.*

### Questions.

1. What do you think Saul saw and heard from these “followers of the Way” while he was persecuting them? Why was he so angry? Are there present day “followers” that make you angry (or that you make angry)?
2. Did Ananias require healing?
3. When I was younger, people in the Church had definite views on homosexuality and gender issues. Over the years lots of firmly held beliefs have changed (or not). Do you recognize any big shifts in belief or Damascus road experiences in your life?
4. How would you describe the healing that occurs in the stories?
5. In a flight of whimsy what do you hope for as the next big Damascus road for the Church?

**Prayer.** I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. AMEN

## Session #6: Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)

**Introduction.** In 722, the Assyrians overran the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported its people to the lands of the East. In their place, the Assyrian King settled people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim. The so-called Samaritans practiced the religions of their homelands and worshiped the Lord. There was strife between the Jews and the Samaritans. Most Jews did not consider Samaritans to be real Jews.

The setting for our story is a well outside the Samaritan city of Sychar. The gospel writer identifies the well to be Jacob's well. The scene of a man meeting a woman at the well recalls the OT betrothal stories of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24:10-27), Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29:1-12). This story is not about a betrothal, but of eschatological fulfillment (answering who Jesus is).

### Questions.

1. Read 4:1-9. Why does Jesus speak to this Samaritan woman? What social conventions is Jesus breaking? How do Jews in Jesus' time regard Samaritans? Why is the woman coming to draw water at noon (the heat of the day)? The word translated "had to" (in 4:4) is usually associated in the Fourth Gospel with God's plan. In other words, it was God's plan that Jesus continues his ministry next in Samaria.
2. Read 4:10-15. Who or what is the "gift of God" (4:10)? What is "living water" (4:10)? "Living water" has two possible meanings, (1) fresh, running water or spring water, and (2) life-giving water, that which sustains life. The woman assumes Jesus is referring to physical water. What is the irony in the woman's question, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" (4:12) The woman assumes incorrectly that Jesus is not greater than Jacob, but all of John's readers know differently.
3. Read 4:16-26. Jesus request, "Go call your husband and come back." (4:16) gets right to the heart of the woman's dilemma. What is that dilemma? How would the people of Sychar regard this woman? She would be a scandalous woman. Jesus does not judge the woman's situation (or declare her a sinner). He needs a witness. The woman recognizes that Jesus is someone special, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." She moves the conversation to the religious level with a question at the heart of the Jewish-Samaritan conflict, "Where should we worship God?" Jesus responds by saying true worship of God transcends place. The woman comes closer to the truth, "I know that Messiah is coming. (who is call Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." (4:25) Jesus drops the bomb. "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Jesus uses the divine name, "I am" for himself. Is the woman ready to be a witness?
4. Read 4:27-30. Why does the woman leave her water jar? What's significant about that? Is the woman an effective witness for who Jesus is? Does the woman's testimony result in action on the part of the people? If Jesus had gone into the city without the woman's testimony, how would he have been received? What is his reception now?
5. Read 4:31-38. The disciples fall into the same physical/spiritual double meaning that the woman did, only this time it is about food, not water. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." Jesus uses two parables. (1) "Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting." Eschatological overtones. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life." The Samaritans of the town are coming out to see Jesus. Jesus informs his disciples that the waiting period to the harvest is over. (2) "One sows while another reaps." The Samaritan woman has been working the harvest, now the disciples will share in the joy of the harvest.
6. Read 4:39-42. Did the people of Sychar believe Jesus? "They asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days." Reminds me of the road to Emmaus. "But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.'" (Lk 24:29) Eschatological overtones. So, the Samaritans here acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, "This is truly the Savior of the world." Contrast that to the reception of the Jews.

7. Why is this a story of healing? Is there a miracle in this story? How could Jesus know the woman's past? See Jn 1:48, calling of Nathanael, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

**Prayer.** Dear Mother, Creator, Father, We are called to join in your harvest. But, so much of our lives are distracted from this crucial calling. Show us that we are not alone in this work, but one of many. All we need to do is to do our part. Give us courage. In Jesus name, Amen.