

Healing and Renewal

Robbi-Ann Gunter was visiting friends near Orangeville, Ontario one summer weekend. She was trampolining with a partner when she lost control, flipped over the edge of the metal frame and landed hard on the back of her head, her neck cracking like dominoes falling on a hard surface. She lay still until paramedics arrived and gently took her to the hospital. X-rays revealed dislocated vertebrae that threatened to damage the spinal cord. She was airlifted to Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto for more specialized treatment. But that wasn't immediately possible, so she called her grandmother, a Cherokee elder and healer.

Robbi-Ann was told that although her grandmother could pray for her and perform a healing ceremony, she had to do something, too. A Medicine Journey would help in her recovery, aligning her spirit and body with the Creator's will. Unable to do anything else, she closed her eyes and saw a beautiful dog romping in the summer sun despite a leg injury. It was a sign that she would also be just like that animal. When she opened her eyes, hospital staff told her that surgery wouldn't be necessary. The dislodged vertebrae had shifted back into place! She was kept under observation for several more days, then released with her spine intact, and no evidence of any damage. The doctors couldn't offer any explanation. Robbi-Ann knew better.

In our New Testament reading from the book of Acts, we hear of another miracle of healing that gave the apostle Peter the opportunity to tell people about its source – the same one that we can go to for wholeness and renewal. The story begins a few verses before the lectionary passage.

“Peter and John went to the Temple one afternoon to take part in the three o'clock prayer service. As they approached the Temple, a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day

he was put beside the Temple gate, the one called the Beautiful Gate, so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for some money. Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, ‘Look at us!’ The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting some money. But Peter said, ‘I don’t have any silver or gold for you. But I’ll give you what I have.’” (Acts 3:1-6a)

Possibly Peter and John had seen this man previously when they’d come to the Temple, and wanted to help him. But giving alms would only be a temporary fix. He needed something permanent, for his body to be made whole. The apostles knew they couldn’t do this on their own, but by the power of the One who strengthened them and had given them the mission to carry on this work (Luke 9:2).

“‘In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!’ Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man’s feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk!” (Acts 3:6b-8a) What a revelation of God’s power, not just to the once-lame man, but to those who saw this wonderful act of kindness. It was in the name of Jesus that a blessing had been given to one who had been unable to walk for forty years (Acts 4:22). And what was the response?

“Then walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them. All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded! They all rushed out in amazement to Solomon’s Colonnade, where the man was holding tightly to Peter and John.” (Acts 3:8b-11) This was the most fitting way the man could have reacted – exuberant praise to God who had made it possible. The crowd’s attention was also captured in a dramatic way, focusing attention on how this had come to be – by an act of mercy in the name of Jesus of

Nazareth, God's anointed one. Peter lost no time in seizing the moment to tell the people more about Jesus.

“Peter saw the opportunity and addressed the crowd. ‘People of Israel,’ he said, ‘what is so surprising about this? And why stare at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power or godliness? For it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God of all our ancestors – who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this.’” (Acts 3:12-13a) Peter’s message to his listeners that day is also a message to us as we grow in our Christian faith. From what he said we should understand:

1) Our focus is on Jesus. He is where we need to go for direction, guidance, and strength to do the tasks he’s given us to do each day. Our belief in our risen Lord and Savior must be strong and vibrant, not weak and faithless. Luke’s telling of the resurrection appearance in the upper room was to make sure everyone was certain of Jesus’ new life. “‘Why are you frightened?’ he asked. ‘Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it’s really me. Touch me and make sure that I’m not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see I do’ As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his feet.” (Luke 24:38-40)

2) Our proof is in scripture. “But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had foretold about the Messiah – that he must suffer these things. Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.’”

(Acts 3:18,22) Good advice for us today – the need to listen carefully to the words of Jesus and imitate the example of his life of service and sacrifice. The certainty of our faith is strengthened by being mindful that the record of Jesus’ rising is preserved by those who actually experienced his resurrected person, as Peter said, “but God raised him from the dead. And we are witnesses of this fact!” (Acts 3:15) Notice the word “fact”, not fable or legend, but a true event.

3) Our source is in Jesus' help. "Through faith in the name of Jesus, this man was healed – and you know how crippled he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has healed him before your very eyes." (Acts 3:16) Belief leads to trust. We can trust that God will take our requests seriously as we learned in our Psalm. "Answer me when I call to you, O God who declares me innocent. Free me from my troubles. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer." (Psalm 4:1) Trust builds over time as we see how God handles our needs, how Jesus leads us like a shepherd towards the best solutions. That's the foundation of faith – "the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; ...[the] assurance about things we cannot see." (Hebrews 11:1)

4) Our response is repentance and new life. "Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will again send you Jesus, your appointed Messiah." (Acts 3:190-20) The Greek verb *metanoeo* means "to change your mind or attitude from one way of thinking to another." That's because the Greeks believed that a change of one's mind would naturally lead to a change in one's actions, because beliefs determine behavior - very different from today's psychological disciplines that emphasize feelings - to change behaviors we must first "get in touch" with our feelings. However, beliefs are the real starting point for action. We must allow God to unsnarl (Greek *exaleitho* – "to obliterate, erase, remove, blot out, wipe away") the tangle that sin has made of our lives, opening the door to God's forgiveness, putting us on a new path that leads from darkness to light.

Greg Fouts was jogging in a Calgary park on the first warm day of spring when he spotted an elderly gentleman sitting alone on a wooden bench. He went over and sat beside him, the older man making small talk to get the conversation going. His genuineness and comfortable smile broke the ice with Greg who soon became absorbed in learning all about the stranger's life

and telling a few things about his own: favorite TV programs, places visited in Canada, politics, different experiences as parents and especially deep feelings about a family situation that had broken his heart. He hadn't seen his daughter and ten-year-old grandson Jason in over two years after a disagreement ended in an angry separation. His expression brightened when he told Greg that things would be better when the two flew into the city for a short visit.

Greg couldn't believe that what seemed like a half-hour had actually been three hours! Although they had never met before, the two had been captured in a moment of time, as if it was meant to be. They bade farewells, "See ya around," smiling and waving as they parted. They knew they'd probably never see each other again.

Several days later, Greg noticed the old man's picture in the newspaper obituaries. He decided to write a brief letter to the man's daughter in care of the funeral home. Perhaps it would ease her grief. Eight months later he received a reply. "Dear Mr. Fouts, I wish to thank you for being the kind of person you are to talk to an old man sitting alone on a park bench. You were probably the last person he talked to in his life, since he passed away from a heart attack near the place you said you had met. My father and I came to terms with our differences and were looking forward to meeting again. I take comfort in knowing that you were there with him to share the sunshine and a few thoughts. You saved his day and gave him hope."

That's what Jesus' Hebrew name means – *Yeshua* or Joshua, "the Lord saves". That's what Jesus' title means – Christ or *Christos* in Greek, *Messiah* in Hebrew – "the Anointed One who Saves". Saving people for resurrection life is what Jesus does best. It's what we can do best when we follow his example. May we allow Christ's mission of being God's love to those around us continue in the days ahead. Amen.