

Healed, not cured: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Mark 1:40-45

by [Debra Farrington](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

They both were angry, and they had a right to be angry. Judy's mother was chronically ill, and would be for the rest of her life. As an only child Judy felt responsible, and she did her duty, caring for her mother without assistance. She counted the cost all the way, exhausting people around her by eliciting sympathy from them, and then moving on to others. Judy talked often about what kind of help she needed, but she never actually looked for help. She had decided that God had willed her a difficult life, and that nothing would be good again until after her mother died and Judy was relieved of her burden.

Bill was suffering too. Like his other siblings, he had cystic fibrosis, a disease that would kill him in middle age. He had already watched his two teenage siblings die. Like Job, he railed at God, wanting to know what he and his family had done to deserve such a horrible sentence. He wanted a trial, a forum where he could be proven innocent. More than anything, he wanted God to show up and solve things. If God was good, God would heal him; otherwise God was not good.

Watching people struggle with suffering and hopes for healing leaves the rest of us feeling helpless. What can we say to them? In the midst of pain most of us want answers, and we want direction—clear steps to take that lead to a predictable result. But that's not what the week's lectionary texts give us.

The psalmist apparently solved his problems with a threat: "What profit is there in my death? Will the dust praise you?" It seems to have worked for him; God turned his mourning into joy, and the psalmist offered God praise.

Naaman, on the other hand, needed more coaching. He was important, the commander of an army, so who was Elisha to send a messenger with instructions instead of coming personally? If it hadn't been for Naaman's servants, who convinced him to follow the instructions despite his bruised ego, Naaman would have walked away.

And then there's the leper in Mark, whose line resonates so deeply: "If you choose, you can make me clean." The leper's bold vulnerability brings us up short, perhaps

because that much openness is truly frightening, or perhaps because his courage inspires us.

So what's the sure-fire prescription for obtaining a cure? Threatening, washing, begging? Threatening God doesn't seem like the best strategy, but then again, God responded to the psalmist. Washing? Of the three characters in these stories, Naaman is the least sympathetic. Yet he gets a prescription: he's told to wash in the Jordan seven times.

Begging? The story from Mark is perhaps the most troubling. Although Jesus heals the leper, we all know instances in which someone who genuinely desires healing has asked and not been cured. This story easily turns into an accusation: "It is only your own faithlessness that keeps you from being well," it seems to say. That's what some folks told Bill about his cystic fibrosis. And yet, we can't entirely walk away from this story either. The leper's cry is too plaintive; it catches at our heartstrings. Which of us doesn't want to hope that all we have to do is ask and a cure will follow?

So much for a simple step-by-step, no-fail prescription. Perhaps what these stories have in common is that each man was cured by engaging with God. In the biblical texts they are cured—that is, their bodily ailments are remedied—but the texts seem to imply that they were also healed; they came to know a place of peace and joy in God's presence. We can opt out of this process, as Naaman almost did: God doesn't force anyone to be healed.

As I watch people who suffer, engagement seems to be the only constant that brings about true healing. We may or may not be cured by engaging and wrestling with God, but we will be healed. The difficulty is that engagement is hard work, and the vulnerability it requires is terrifying. Because Judy has decided that God wants her to be miserable, she has cut herself off from conversation with God and written her own prescription: her mother's death is the solution for her troubles. I suspect God will have a hard time talking her out of that for the near future.

Bill, on the other hand, wrestled with God until he got an answer. He wanted to know how anyone could call God good, and he stayed in the conversation—sometimes with anger and other times through tears—until he heard something other than silence. Two weeks before he died Bill spent an hour telling me how blessed his life had been. He was never cured of his disease, but he was healed. He died knowing that God loved him deeply.

Engaging with God is hard work, as Jacob and Job can attest. It's more often like a wrestling match than a civilized conversation. If we're being truthful, we'd have to admit that we want a simpler prescription—a pill to take. We don't want to be vulnerable with God. Deciding that God wills our own or others' suffering, as Judy has done, can be easier than boldly demanding an explanation or cure we might not receive, or might not like. Yet it is only through openly engaging with God that we find our healing. "Oh Lord, be my helper!" demands the psalmist. "If you choose," begs the leper. Engaging with God, remaining in the conversation until we get an answer, is the only way to turn our own mourning and the mourning in the world around us into dancing, and to transform the sackcloth we wear into joy.