As we return to the book of Acts, we will once again give our attention to the life and ministry of the Apostle Peter. Please stand and let’s read Acts 9:31-43.

Let me remind you of where we are. For the past several weeks we have been examining the transformation of Saul the Persecutor who is now becoming the Apostle Paul. After getting run out Damascus, Saul went down to Jerusalem to connect with the apostles and the Jerusalem church and he began engaging the Hellenist synagogue leaders in debates about Jesus. However, the Hellenists in Jerusalem want Saul dead, and when the brothers…the apostles within the church in Jerusalem…learn about the death threat against Saul, they smuggle him out of town and down to Caesarea. There they place him on a ship heading north to Saul’s hometown of Tarsus. Luke concludes in vs. 31 that after Saul’s conversion and his departure to Tarsus, the persecution against the early church in the regions of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria settled down, providing a period of peace, such that the church multiplied and was built up.

So we learn then, in vs. 32, that Peter is visiting believers “here and there,” and on this particular occasion he is visiting the believers in the city of Lydda. It’s possible that Peter is in Lydda because he was recently in Caesarea and now he’s in the process of making his way back to Jerusalem after seeing Saul off on his journey. However, this story in Lydda may have taken place much later as well…it’s hard to say. Whatever the case may be, Luke writes that Peter is now in Lydda, well outside of his main base of operations in the Jerusalem temple. Though only 53 miles northwest of Jerusalem, Lydda would have been considered a city with a large gentile population in addition to many Jews who lived there.

As Peter visits the “saints,” he comes across a man named Aeneas, who has been bedridden for eight years due to paralysis.

Aeneas would have likely been a Jewish convert and his paralysis would have likely been due to an injury, given that he had only been bedridden for 8 years. Now, we can only imagine the painful plight of a paralytic in the ancient world. This man’s life is not one most of us could bear…his never ending sores, his dependence upon friends and family to haul him around on a mat…his inability to earn a living to support his family, the likely risk of infection or pneumonia or any other list of infirmities due to his state of immobility for 8 years…he is a man to be pitied. Nevertheless, when news of Jesus Christ resurrected makes its way down to Lydda, Aeneas is moved to repent and call upon the name of Jesus as the Messiah of God and the Savior of his soul. Note that Aeneas’s conversion does not immediately bring healing to the paralyzed man.
However, when Peter meets Aeneas, the Lord shows Peter that the healing has been accomplished. Instead of calling upon the name of Jesus for the man to be healed, Peter simply proclaims in vs. 34, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” And immediately he rose.

Now, there are a lot of miracles recorded in the Bible, but I have to say that this particular miracle is more profound and moving to me than any other, and I’ll tell you why. I’ve been commanding my teenage sons to rise and make their beds for years, and Lord knows it would take a miracle of epic proportions for that to ever actually happen!

All kidding aside, this is a truly remarkable miracle that takes place in the city of Lydda, and if you’re paying attention, it is a miracle that should remind us of a very similar story that we’ve heard before, right? Who could forget the dramatic healing by Jesus in Luke 5 of a paralytic whose friends had lowered him down through the roof? The words used by Peter are very similar to those spoken by Jesus as we read in Luke 5:24, “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.” So once again we see the apostles doing the same work that Jesus did, which demonstrates that the work of Jesus continues to take place through the followers of Jesus and by the authority of His name.

We’ll see that tendency again as we look to what comes next beginning with vs. 36: Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity.

Joppa was about a day’s walk northwest from Lydda towards the coast. Ancient Joppa was a beautiful city in the middle of what was known as the Plains of Sharon. The region was known for its beautiful trees and fertile soil. First century Joppa was very Hellenistic, so this city would have had the feel of a Gentile city to be sure. Nevertheless, Tabitha is described as a disciple, and she is the first female who is directly called a disciple of Jesus. It’s interesting that Luke provides the translation for her name. Tabitha was this woman’s Aramaic name, which came from the Hebrew word meaning, “gazelle.” Her Greek name, Dorcas, also translated as “gazelle.” If you remember the Song of Solomon, the “gazelle” was a metaphor used for the “beloved” written about in Song 2:9 and 8:14. I think Luke emphasizes her name because her character fits with the title. Tabitha is a beautiful person inside and out. Her life exhibits the grace of Christ in the way she cares for the poor and the widows. She is full of mercy in her actions and generosity in her spirit.
Unfortunately, Tabitha contracts an illness and she is pronounced dead during that same period of time that Peter was residing in Lydda. Instead of making sure she is buried by nightfall, which would have been the Jewish custom, the believers place her in an upper room. In some parts of the ancient world, it was believed that the soul still lingered around the body for up to three days, so the believers in Joppa may have been hoping that Peter could bring her back if they got to him in time. Luke reports that two disciples set journey up to Lydda to see if they can convince the Apostle Peter to come down to Joppa. Let’s pick up the story there in vs. 39:

So Peter arose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.

Again, the parallels between Peter’s healing of Tabitha and Jesus’ healing of Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5 are very evident. Like Jesus, Peter arrives too late to heal the dying woman. We can assume that Tabitha has now been dead for at least two days if not three. Like Jesus, Peter sends away the mourners. In this instance in Acts 9, the mourners are also those widows who had benefitted from Tabitha’s ministry, for they are all holding onto the garments she had sewn for them. Remember that being a widow in the ancient world was a desperate situation. If widows could not get remarried, their plight was dire…they would likely be forced to beg or even prostitute themselves to survive. Such is still the case in many parts of the world. Clearly Tabitha had a ministry that blessed the widows, for now they gather around the house in which her cold body lays, clinging to the physical evidence of Tabitha’s love for them all. Nevertheless, Peter puts them all outside, and like Jesus, he kneels down beside the dead body of this woman. Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus by his own authority; however, Peter has no power to raise the dead. Peter must pray, and that is what he does. In prayer he is seeking the will of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, and somehow in that time of prayer, God makes it clear to Peter that Tabitha’s time on earth is not yet expired. So that Jesus might be lifted up and souls might be saved, the Holy Spirit moves powerfully through Peter to bring Tabitha back to life. Peter calls her by the name given to her at birth saying, “Tabitha, rise.”

Don’t you wish you could have been there to see that miracle take place? It’s truly hard to imagine such an amazing event. But notice, the miracle did not happen in isolation. Luke reports that Peter presented Tabitha alive to the church and to the widows. Again, note the historical nature of this story. We know exactly what city this event took place in. We know the name of the person said to have died and been brought back to life through prayer…her name was Tabitha, but she often went by her Greek name, Dorcas. This was not an unknown woman…she was very well known due to her ministry to widows, and there would have been untold numbers of witnesses who would have testified that she was dead…for days…and that an apostle of Jesus...
from Jerusalem who had been lodging in Lydda came to see her; that he ushered everyone out; and after a while presented Tabitha alive before numerous witnesses. The story is so unusual, so specific, and so amazing that it would have been quite easy for critics of Christianity to refute had it not actually happened, but there is no record at all that anyone ever refuted the historical accuracy of this account. Nor did anyone every refute the accuracy of any healing stories that were said to have taken place in the New Testament, even though many of those miracles were said to have happened with very specific people in very specific towns in the presence of many witnesses.

Make no mistake, these healing stories spread like wildfire, and Luke acknowledges that due to the healing of Aeneas, all the residents of Lydda and Sharon “turned to the Lord” when they saw Aeneas walking. In the same way, Luke concludes in vs. 42, “And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”

Now, I know that many of you become almost irritated when we hear and study these kinds of stories in the Bible because you have never seen a dramatic healing, and you tend to think those stories are made up. Others of you are frustrated by these stories because you prayed feverishly for your loved one to have a miraculous healing, and yet that person died and you feel like God did not deliver on what you feel like the Bible promises.

I understand…and that is why we should acknowledge that healing stories will never conform to any kind of a formula. Like all events in history, healing stories either happened or they didn’t. Again, these stories are part of the New Testament as recorded by Luke, and the vast majority of historians—even atheist historians—have to credit Luke for being one of the most reliable historians we have from the first century Roman world. Unless you’ve already decided that supernatural events never take place, there would be no reason to conclude that these stories are false. If you have a foregone conclusion that supernatural events never take place, you are succumbing to an intellectually weak position, for the evidence that supernatural events DO take place are exactly the kinds of stories that we just read from otherwise historically reliable sources. That would be like dismissing the murder weapon covered with finger prints because the finger prints happen to belong to our best friend and we’ve already decided that our best friend would never do something like commit a murder. We cannot dismiss evidence because it reveals something we’ve already decided we don’t believe in.

But why didn’t God heal our loved one that we prayed so long and hard for? If healing stories are true, and people are even still healed today on occasion, why did God not heal our mom, or child, or that person who suffered so terribly? Did we do something wrong? Did we pray incorrectly? Was our faith, or their faith, too weak?
Listen, as we study healing stories in the Bible and even some of the thousands of healing stories that have been recorded in the name of Jesus over the past 2000 years, we can only conclude that healing stories happen when God, in His divine wisdom, chooses to act powerfully in the life of a particular person in a particular town at a particular moment for His particular reasons. Healing stories are particular, not general. Healing stories are exceptional, not predictable. Healing stories happen to make God famous, not us. Healing stories serve to encourage the faith of believers and to draw unbelievers to consider the claims of the gospel. But listen: healing stories are never an end to themselves. Every single person who was ever healed in the Bible…and every single person that has ever been healed since…every single one of those fortunate people who experienced supernatural healing in their bodies and in their lives eventually got sick or weak or physically compromised or even suffered violence that inevitably led to their death. Healing stories are not an end to themselves. Healing stories are a means to an end. And what is the”end?” The end is that people would turn to God…both those who are healed, and those who are influenced by the healing story. That is always the end. The chief end of man, according to the Westminster Confession, is “To Glorify God and Enjoy Him Forever.” That’s the point of the healing story…that’s actually the point of everything.

Now, after enough time goes by, we can sometimes begin to see some of the reasons behind God choosing to heal certain people at certain times, but it’s typically not what you think at first glance. Take these stories for example. There is so much we DON’T know about Aeneas and Tabitha that it would be impossible for us to hazard a guess as to why God chose to heal these particular individuals. We know Tabitha was a pretty special person, but as far as we know Aeneas may have been a chronic whiner who had an overdeveloped victim complex and generally irritated everyone in the room. Again, we simply don’t know why God chose to prompt Peter to declare the healing of Christ over the former paralytic. We cannot assume that it was because Aeneus was a “good person,” or because he was a Christian, or because Aeneus’s family prayed really hard and for a very long time. We simply don’t know, and that’s true for Tabitha as well. We do know the effect of the healing story on untold numbers of people in those cities and the region of Sharon, and the effect was that many, many, souls turned to Jesus as their Savior. So, we can conclude that God used those healing opportunities to advance His Kindgom at a very strategic place and time, and that makes sense, right? It wasn’t about Tabitha and Aeneus per se, it was about God’s plan and God’s agenda.

We can also see what is beginning to happen with Peter that will develop more fully next week. Peter is beginning to see the power of the Holy Spirit working in people and cities that are far from the church in Jerusalem. These are primarily Gentile cities, and yet the same powerful healing events are happening here as they did in the temple courts. Peter is learning that the power of Christ is not limited to geography or particular places of worship. And ever so slowly,
Peter is warming up to the idea that the Holy Spirit is working among people who don’t fit the mold.

Remember, Peter has been raised his whole life to believe that the Gentiles are scum. The Jew’s prejudice against non-Jews goes all the way back to Abraham and Jonah. When Peter was growing up, Jewish midwives were forbidden to aid a Gentile woman in childbirth, for they would thereby help propagate Gentile scum. The Hebrews called Gentiles *goyim* “the nations,” and they spat that word out the same way Smeagol said “Gollum”…with intense contempt. The New Testament writers are honest enough to record that this tendency to hold contempt against the Gentiles transferred into Hebrew-Christianity, and Peter was no exception. Peter had a bad attitude towards the Gentiles…how could he not? And yet, if you’re paying attention, both of these stories reveal that God is moving powerfully in predominantly Gentile cities. So far the recipients of the healing stories are Jewish converts, but the locale of these stories is significant: God is moving Peter away from Jerusalem, showing His power in predominantly Gentile cities, and ever so slowly Peter is letting down his defenses.

Look at the last verse of our thought unit, vs. 43, “And Peter stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.” I know that seems like useless trivia, but it’s not trivial. Tanners were people who killed and skinned animals. They were detested in the Jewish world and required to live well outside of the city limits. They were considered to be chronically unclean, and yet Peter, the Jewish Apostle of Jesus Christ, resides in his house for several days.

Now Peter was no Pharisee…he was, after all, a fisherman by trade, so being around stinky dead stuff was probably not a big deal for him. Nevertheless, God is clearly working on Peter to let go of his Jewish purity mindset, and I think the fact that Peter stays with Simon the Tanner reveals that Peter’s heart is beginning to change towards people who would be deemed unwanted or unacceptable by his own parents and grandparents. That’s pretty important, and next week we’ll see how God leads Peter to open his heart even more to those thought to be unclean and beyond redemption.

So here’s some takeaways as we prepare to head back out into our busy and sometimes painful lives: First, healing stories always serve God’s agenda, and God’s agenda is rarely if ever to make our bodies free from sickness so that we will always be comfortable and live forever on earth in perfectly healthy bodies! Clearly God’s agenda for healing people in a dramatic and supernatural way is something other than that. In the case of our stories this morning, we can see that God’s purpose for powerful healing in the life of a person is so that 1) God would be glorified; 2) so many would turn to Christ; and 3) the one healed would give testimony to the power of God; and 4) so that the one who the Holy Spirit spoke through to bring healing would grow in faith and understanding.
Many of you have very powerful stories of healing. I have heard many since I came here to Colonial, and my takeaway from all of those stories is that God’s motives for healing generally remain the same today as they were in the first century. In almost every healing story I’ve heard from you, 1) God received glory; 2) many people were drawn to Christ as a result; and 3) both the person who was healed and the person God used in the healing process grew in faith and understanding. That is as it should be.

So we know from our scripture lesson today that God heals people for His reasons…and I actually think we are all pretty good with that logic, right? The harder truth to accept is that God will often NOT heal a person for the very same reasons. What do I mean by that?

We’ve all witnessed godly, faithful followers of Jesus who suffered terribly, and after so much prayer for healing, finally ended up dying from their sickness. In those cases, God chose not to heal their bodies. In many instances these saints suffered terribly, and yet they suffered faithfully…and their journey of suffering produced Kingdom fruit not unlike that which we associate with supernatural healing stories.

I can’t help but think of sweet Mary Brooks who had a sudden onset of ALS and died just a few months later. I’ll never forget sitting in her living room with Bill just hours after they heard the prognosis. Bill and I were a mess, but Mary was unshaken. She trusted God, and her response to all of us was a big smile and her infamous question, “Why not me?” She refused to complain against God, and she gave him glory and honor right up to her last breath. Her faithful witness during that time no doubt led many people into a deeper relationship with Christ…I am one of them. Dave Unruh was exactly the same way, as were so many followers of Jesus I have known throughout my life who are now with the Lord.

Listen friends, there is nothing wrong with praying for healing. In fact, Jesus instructed us to pray for our healing and to pray for the healing of others. But let us never forget that the ultimate healing…the healing that Jesus died to achieve…is the forgiveness of sins that leads us to eternal life. Jesus often interweaved the language of physical healing with the forgiveness of sins as we saw in Luke 5 when Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of sins to the paralytic even before he tells him to rise and take up his mat. The writer of James also interweaves physical healing and the forgiveness of sins. Listen to the James 5:13-16, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”
Ultimate and final healing IS the forgiveness of sins. The ultimate healing stories are those stories of people who have experienced forgiveness and reconciliation with God and others through the sacrificial blood of Christ crucified. That kind of healing is available for all who repent and call upon the name of Jesus, and that kind of healing lasts for eternity. Listen: if you have a healing story…a physical healing story, a spiritual healing story, a relational healing story…tell your story. Give God the glory so that others might be drawn to Jesus…that’s how it works.

Let’s pray.