

Casting Out Troubled Spirits:

a worried mother, a terrified a child, a bewildered priest

sermon preached by The Reverend Anne Hodges-Copple at St Luke's, Durham NC

Epiphany 6 2/15/09

In today's readings we heard two accounts of men healed from leprosy. Such skin disease caused all kinds of physical discomfort and, maybe more painfully, social shunning. Naaman was a highly successful warrior in the land of Aram. But he had to turn to a rather unlikely source for healing: a prophet from the rival state of Israel. Elisha was under no compunction to heal this proud man. In fact Naaman initially rejects Elisha's directive to go wash in the river: "Hey, we've to rivers back in Damascus just as clean as your river Jordan. I could have a good wash in the river back home." Some gentle nudging from some loyal servants prevents Naaman from falling victim to his pride as well as to leprosy.

In Mark's gospel a man kneels down before Jesus: "If you choose, you can heal me." Jesus responds: "I do so choose." The leprosy is cured and the man is able to go to the temple priests and be received back into the community the ritually pure and proper Jewish society. Despite Jesus stern caution to say nothing to anyone but go only to the priests, the man can't help sharing his good news with anyone who will listen.

Elisha and Jesus knew that their calling included the ministry of healing. They also knew that such powers were easily misunderstood and could even be misused. In the time of Elisha, in the times of Jesus, and down to our own day there have always been faith healers: those who seem to possess amazing and mysterious powers to perform cures. Some are charlatans and many others, I believe, have a genuine gift for channel healing power.

I have a firm belief in the power of God to work in mysterious ways, including healing and even, on occasion, curing disease. I also know that while all prayers are answered, they are not always answered the exact way we hope for. Even so, I am very comfortable taking my spot over in the healing chapel and sharing in the ministry of the lay on of hands for healing. I am very comfortable anointing the sick with the oil blessed by our bishop. But in during my recent travel with the Belize mission team, I was faced with a request for healing that compelled me to step out way far from my comfort zone.

Things that go bump in the night

Late one night, only about ten days ago, twenty-year-old Rachel woke up in her one room house on the outermost edge of San Mateo, Belize. Her husband and two young sons were still asleep. She looked over the swamp outside the window of the tiny box of a house she and her husband had built from discarded wood planks and scrap metal. Like other rather ramshackle dwellings nearby, her house was built on piles that rose above the soft ground created by filling in the lagoon with a dubious combination of sand and trash. San Mateo was created away from any land that could be valuable to developers and to keep poor workers and their families out of the sight of the thriving tourist industry of San Pedro. Despite the beautiful multi-hued turquoise waters of the Caribbean that surrounds Ambergris Cay, Rachel and her neighbors were surrounded by brackish water, and a ground so lacking in nutrients that the hardiest shrub had a difficult go of it.

Rachel awoke because she sensed something was wrong. As she told the social worker at Holy Cross Anglican School later that day, she felt something invisible move across the swamp and into her home. She felt something dark and sinister blow into the house. She closed the board door across the window. Shortly thereafter her youngest child, three year old Ronan, woke up crying. He called out in a terrified voice that crabs were eating him. Candles were lit and the child examined by worried parents. They could find no evidence of any bites. They could find no physical source of the child's continued cries. They tried to soothe him, but he remained listless and distressed. Rachel feared that evil spirits had come into her house perhaps, upon her child.

But Rachel was not merely a superstitious or hysterical mother. The next day she took her son to local clinic, but they could find no cause for his continued discomfort. She went to a local church and asked the minister to come bring holy water to her home, but he declined. No time. Later in the day, when she came to pick up her older son from Holy Cross Anglican School, she explained her situation to the social worker and asked if the school had holy water. "Well, not that I know, of, replied Kim, a social work professor from University of Mississippi who is spending her sabbatical at Holy Cross. "But we do have a priest" chimed in

Francis Wilson, one of the founders of the school. “We have a priest visiting with members of her parish from North Carolina. She might be willing to help.”

Kim came and found me in the library where I was quite contentedly creating check out cards for dozens and dozen of books in the endless Magic Tree House series. Kim took me out on a deck that looks out over the lagoon and pointed to a hut on stilts across the water and told me Rachel’s story. “Anne, I’m Methodist. We don’t talk about demons or evil spirits let alone possession. But something is definitely wrong with this child. I’ve never seen him like this. He is usually so happy.” “Kim, I’m Episcopalian. We might discuss demons in a Bible study, but that’s as close as I’ve gotten.” I paused, thinking to myself: what am I going to say if she asks me to perform an exorcism. “I could go and do a house blessing and a healing service for the child.”

I was just letting myself try to start picturing how this might work when Kim threw me one more curve ball: “It would probably be best if we took a canoe across the swamp. It would take much less time and be much easier than walking those skinny elevated boards that precariously crisscross San Mateo. Of course, there are alligators,” she added causally.

(Thinking back on this I now realize that at that moment I experienced a case of temporary amnesia: I didn’t remember the reflection I gave the first night we were in Belize challenging my fellow team members to be like the disciple Peter and be willing to step out of out the boat, out of our comfort zones and be willing to walk toward Jesus in faith, even across dangerous waters. I must have had temporary amnesia.) “Kim” I said, “I am way more afraid of alligators than of evil spirits.”

“Couldn’t we just walk the plank? As in the planks.” By which I really meant the planks: the network of make-shift elevated walkways made from broken precariously balanced upon stakes set in the soft and toxic looking ground. Now don’t picture the nice wide boardwalks of your favorite place at the beach. These are narrow, shaky walkways of broken planks of wood that snake through San Mateo, turning off here and there leading to a dwelling. Anyone who knows me well knows I have trouble keeping my balance on wide flat surfaces. Still I felt falling off the elevated boards would only be embarrassing and maybe a little dangerous. Tipping over in the lagoon could be lethal.

As it was late in the day, Kim went back to the other side of the school and told the mom to come back in the morning if things weren’t better and she wanted the priest to come to her house.

I did not have a particularly easy rest that night. I hoped and prayed that Ronan had slept better and that whatever had disturbed his mind, body and spirit or stomach had passed. Unlike the prophet Elisha who volunteered to help Naaman; unlike Jesus who immediately put out his hand to heal the leper, I worried that I could make a bad situation worse. I wondered if priests have the same sacred obligation doctors have: first, do no harm.

I could just imagine putting my hands on the child’s head for the prayers of healing only to have him scream and cringe with fear and alarm which would, of course, only confirms the mother’s worst fears of demon possession.

Unfortunately for Ronan and his distraught mother, he was little better the next day. When I met them the next morning, which was now more than 24 hours from the original night terror, he was whimpering in his mother’s arms, begging for something, though I couldn’t make out the words.

Rachel turned to me. Without dismissing medical and emotional explaining, or “Can you come? Can you come and bring the holy water? I asked another priest, but he said he was too busy.” I reached down and picked up the bag I had packed just in case the cup had not passed from me. “Of course” I replied, casting out my own demons of self-doubts “I would be honored to visit your home and bless it with Holy Water.”

We slowly and carefully made our way through the winding board walks of San Mateo. Rachel called out to house after house greeting her neighbors, many of whom asked after Ronan. Many of her friends had made various dark suggestions as to how to rid him of the evil spirit. “But I believe in God” she replied. “I will not turn to other powers. I will only rely but my faith in Almighty God.” Her faith reminded me of another

young woman who long ago put her sole and complete trust in the Lord: As Rachel refused to let fear overshadow her faith, I thought of the Song Mary/Magnificat:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
He has mercy on those who fear him * in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, * he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, * and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, * for he has remembered his promise of mercy, The promise he made to our fathers, * to Abraham and his children for ever.

As we went along, she told Kim where the babies lived, where abandoned children played, where undocumented workers were hiding their children from the authorities. Kim made notes as to where the doctors and nurses from St. Luke's might make house calls the next week.

Finally we reached Rachel's home. She had carried her three year old the whole way. "Sometimes, I let him down but then he sometimes falls from the boards. It's better this way." There was hardly room for the four of us to stand inside the hut. So I opened my bag and pulled out an altar cloth and set it upon a table on the deck just outside the door. I placed the prayer book, a small bible, a bowl a small pitcher and my water bottle on the table. While Rachel and Kim talked some more I sat down beside Ronan and handed him a very small pocket sized bible. He took it with surprising gentleness and respect and began to look through it. I opened my prayer book and did the same. And then we traded books, each watching the other from the corner of our eyes. It seemed to me like a kind of parallel liturgical play. I poured the water in to a pitcher and asked Rachel to find me a sprig of leaves. Rachel had told me that her grandmother's favorite Psalm was 91. I remembered that it made mention of God sending angels for protection. As I began to read it aloud, I was stunned by its pitch perfect relevance;

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,*
²will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.'
³For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
⁴he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
⁵**You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,**
⁶**or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.**

I wasn't exactly sure about how to create Holy Water. I decided to use the prayer we say over water for baptism: *We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.*

I then took the sprig, dipped it in the water and began flinging water everywhere: over the door posts, inside and out. Over the windows, inside and out. I just made it up as I went along, inviting the Holy Spirit to visit the place, to drive away all sickness of mind, body and spirit. I invited the Holy Spirit to dwell in this home

and abide with this family, keeping them safe from all harm. We crowded into the tiny house and blessed the stove and the kitchen table. Ronan was delighted with this shower of water being cast all over the place. He and his mother laughed as I shook the branch with the holy water over their beds and over their heads.

I then knelt down and placed my hands on Ronan and prayed for God's healing. I then prayed over Rachel. By his time she is crying and I thought I was about to cry. But Ronan....., but Ronan was all smiles. Earlier when we first arrived his mother had asked him to sing but he shyly refused. Now, he tugged on her shirt. "I want to sing." And as the three adult women stood there dumbstruck he proudly, carefully sang for us. "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. All the people of God, praise the Lord." When he finished there was a long pause. Kim then said. "Wow! I think what we have here is a miracle."

I wonder. I wonder if maybe little Ronan just got dehydrated one night, along with tummy ache, a fever and a bad dream. Maybe he couldn't quite shake off a bad dream. I suspect that Rachel, like many mothers, woke in the night, full of worry, and wondered if her little fragile home could withstand whatever ill winds that might blow through. I don't know exactly combination of powers and principalities, things seen and unseen troubled the spirit of little Ronan. But I do know Rachel needed help. I do know she turned to God and to his church. And I do believe God answered her prayers. And I do think I witnessed a miracle: a two part miracle.

First, I saw a young poor woman with out any kind of social standing, without any kind of economical or political pull put all her trust in the Lord. She did what the Bible told her to do. Ask and it shall be given unto you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened until you. She placed her trust in the God of the Virgin Mary A God who looks with favor on lowly servant; who casts down the mighty from their thrones, *and has lifts up the lowly. God who fills the hungry with good things."

I saw a woman whose love for her child went hand in hand with her love of God.

Part two of the miracle? I saw a bond of fellowship and love that stretches across oceans and across time, across cultures and across class. I saw the miracle of Holy Cross Anglican School that has built a sanctuary of safety for the children of San Mateo. And I saw a bond of fellowship and love where a scared little boy and a priest out of her depth can sit down together and both feel the healing, cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. That is miracle enough for me. AMEN