

Hannover International Worship

January 21, 2024

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Have you ever had to do with spirit healers or miracle healers?

In some rural regions of Germany, they are really popular. I suspect that many people are fascinated by them but won't admit it. People will flock to healers or magic healing places in droves, in hopes of being healed or out of curiosity. Academically educated people even will grasp at this chance when doctors have come to the end of their possibilities.

In other cultures, it is perfectly normal to go to a spirit healer instead of the doctor, which is at least understandable in those regions where there no doctor anywhere near.

Is there such a thing as a miracle healing, or

spirit healing? What do we as Christians make of this phenomenon? What does the Bible say, what does God say about this? Is it God's will what these healers are doing, are they maybe even his tools? Or is it the opposite, something devilish, something that is directed against God? Or, the third possibility, is the whole concept simply harmless but useless nonsense?

The Bible tells of people being healed by Jesus and by a number of other people, the apostles, and some Old Testament prophets.

The Bible also tells of failed attempts at healing: The disciples are very frustrated when they find they are unable to heal a child from his epileptic seizures.

At the same time, the work of doctors is highly appreciated in the Bible: "Honor the physician with the honor due him... The Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them."

In the bible, the work of doctors and miraculous healings are not an either–or kind of thing..

Neither do modern-day physicians deny that there are cases of healing that cannot be explained by science. Equally, modern-day theologians do not, like theologians fifty or hundred years ago, try to explain away the biblical miracles, attributing them to someone's imagination and an unscientific view of the world.

Let's put those two or three thousand year old stories aside for a moment and ask: Do things like that happen today?

And if so, what are we to make of it? Is healing always good, or do we have to find out where this comes from?

In German, some people say "He who heals is right". Is that true?

I have stories of three people for you. These are not stories I made up for this sermon. These are

stories that happened, stories of real existing people.

In the small town of Hermannsburg, the Hermannsburg mission had its yearly festival with lots of guests, local guests and guests from all over the world.

A man from Africa tells his story. This is what he tells: He has always been a Christian, just like most of us. And he suffered from some severe ailment. The doctors are unable to help him. So, eventually, he decides to go to a witch doctor. He goes there with mixed feelings, fully aware that this does not go together well with his Christian faith, but he is desperate. It's the straw he clings to. And his hopes become reality. He is healed from his suffering.

Soon, however, he becomes aware that, while his body has been healed, he has lost his peace. He feels that he has submitted to some power that is not good for him.

He talks to his pastor about it. His pastor recommends that he confess to God what he has done. So, that's what he does.

And, he says, as soon as as he had done that, he regained his inner peace.

Now, did he remain healed, or did his original ailment return? I don't know. It didn't seem to matter in what he had to tell.

A second story. This was someone I personally knew. A young man who grew up in a Christian family.

He grows up in a deep faith to God. But he also goes through a lot of struggle. His eyesight is very bad, he is almost blind.

His greatest wish is to go to university and study the laws. But, technology then not being what it is today, he does not see a chance of how he would ever be able to to that.

One day, friends tell him of a spirit healer who is

going to come into a nearby town. The young man has his doubts. Can someone like that help me?

But his desperation is great, and so he grasps at the idea and puts all his hopes into it.

Together with his friends, he attends the event in the nearby town.

Then, the moment comes that he has been waiting for anxiously: The famous man up on the stage calls out to the weak and the sick and the disabled, he calls them to come up front and be healed. He goes up front, and the healer lays his hands on his head.

And – he is not healed. Again and again, during the following days, he tries to find at least a slight improvement in his eyesight. But – nothing at all. His eyesight is as bad as it always has been.

The next thing we heard from this young man is that they pulled out his dead body from the North Sea – Baltic Sea canal.

A third story. Some of you may have read about this young woman, she wrote an autobiography about her life.

She is an athletic young woman, and one day, she goes swimming in a lake with her friends. Elegantly, she dives into the water.

But the spot is too shallow. She hits the ground and fractures her spine. In a dramatic rescue, they manage to get her out and save her life.

She spends days, weeks, months in the hospital. Eventually, she has to face the reality: She will remain a quadriplegic for the rest of her life, her arms and her legs remaining totally paralyzed. She will never be able to move them again, she does not even have the slightest sensation in them.

This young woman is a Christian, just like the other two people I told you about. She is desperate, she is depressed, but she does not

stop fighting. She asks all her friends and her congregation to pray for her, they lay their hands on her head and anoint her with oil, as the bible says you should do with the sick.

But she is not healed. She falls back into desperation and depression. Worse, she starts to wonder: Maybe my faith wasn't strong enough? Maybe it was my own fault that I wasn't healed?

An evil vicious circle of desperation begins, feelings of guilt, of self-doubt. Sometimes she wishes she could end her life, and only her own inability to access the pills keeps her from doing so.

What is such a life worth, what is it good for? She struggles, she fights, she virtually wrestles with God like Jacob. She reads the bible again and again, the book of suffering Job, the Psalms. She challenges all her friends, her pastor, her family with her questions and her desperation. It's a long way she has to go, much longer than

this sermon should be.

Eventually, she does find her way of living life with her severe disability, and she does find her peace with God. She heals, though not in a physical sense.

Our fourth story, or rather, our first one, is the one we heard earlier, the one about the Aramaic commander Naaman. Naaman is a highly respected man in his country. He has been successful in many battles and stands in high esteem with his king.

But, he is ill. He has contracted one of the most dreaded illnesses of the time: leprosy.

Modern-day medicine can cure leprosy, but back then, physicians were helpless. They had no cure. The only thing they could do, and usually did, is exclude the ill from the community to prevent further spreading. An extreme form of social distancing.

It is surprising and speaks to his high standing

that Naaman apparently is allowed to continue living in his house.

In his home, Naaman has a young slave, loot from one of his battles. Now this young woman, of all people, a young woman who has no reason whatsoever to be well-disposed toward him, tells him of a prophet in Israel.

Naaman is not in the habit of listening to slaves. Neither is he in the habit of asking for help. But desperation makes him grasp at the straw. His king gives him a letter of recommendation and presents, and he goes straight to... well, no, not to the prophet, but to the king of Israel. This must be the appropriate person to contact for an important person like himself, right?

The king of Israel is shocked. Heal leprosy? How does this guy come up with the idea that I can do something like that?

But the prophet Elisha intervenes. He has Naaman come to his house. Naaman does so,

with his whole train of people and horses and chariots.

His expectations are great. Surely, Elisha will now come out to him, lay his hands on him, appeal to his God, and maybe do some wondrous symbolic action as was popular with prophets back then.

None of that. Elisha doesn't even show up. Just a messenger who tells him to wash seven times in the river Jordan.

Naaman is furious. He is not in the habit of listening to subordinates. He turns on his heels and is ready to go straight back home.

Again, it's his subordinates, his servants, who cautiously talk to him: If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. Why don't you at least try what he told you to do?

Naaman is not in the habit of listening to subordinates. But oh well, what does he have to

lose?

To his greatest amazement, his skin heals, it is healthy and clean like the skin of a new-born baby. Naaman, the great commander, is like new-born.

Immediately, he returns to the prophet to give him his gifts. And he has to learn another lesson: The prophet does not accept his gifts.

Naaman has to learn that he cannot pay for his life with a bag of silver. He cannot buy his way out of being grateful and indebted to others.

And he understands and confesses, for his servants and everyone else to hear: "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel."

God's praise is what this story ends in.

Naaman has understood that he owes his life to God.

God's praise is what this story ends in.

This is what counts.

The guest from Africa found out that in the end, the important thing was not being healed or not.

The important thing was finding his peace with God, and praising God with his life.

The young man who wanted so desperately to be healed from his blindness was unable to see what God had in store for him. He was so focussed on his physical healing that he was sucked into a vicious circle of despair and hopelessness.

The young quadriplegic woman was not spared desperation and depression. She, however, continued struggling and wrestling with God. Eventually, she did not find physical healing, but spiritual healing. And she discovered that God had given her gifts she had believed lost. She discovered that her artistic talent did not die with her hands. She started drawing with her mouth, very clumsily at first, but eventually with fine

strokes she could not have done better with her hands. And she started to tell others about her story and praise God with her life.

God's praise is the end of things. Let's make that the end of this sermon too. Let's praise God with your next hymn.

Hymn: Oh That I Had a Thousand Voices