

Dr. Fred Johnson

RENEWING OUR HOPE OF GOD'S HEALING

(Exodus 15.22-17.7)

Introduction:

20 years ago, I went on a personal SILENT spiritual retreat. Forty-eight hours is a long time to remain absolutely silent. But that was the plan. For two days nothing audible was allowed, only silent meditation, silent reflections, silent Bible reading, and silent prayers all directed toward a deeper communion with my Creator. In between long periods of silence was a lot of listening for anything God wanted to say. There were periods of darkness. Life is fragile, it often breaks and brokenness needs mending. Joyfully, there were periods of light leading to a silent recitation of a childhood prayer, God is great, God is good!

I left the campground after 42 hours of silence and drove to Daytona Beach. I wanted to spend the last hours of my silent retreat sitting on the beach admiring the beauty, sky and sea declaring the glory of God (after all, I live in Lincoln now). As I sat overlooking the water my thoughts about the glory of God began to wander. Daytona Beach was a frequent destination growing up especially when I turned 16 and got the car keys. After my wife Kathy's senior prom, we went to Daytona Beach. I can't tell you how many times I took kids to the beach while serving as a youth minister.

Fond memories, yes, but they were distracting memories from my attention on God. I silently repeated the focus word that could bring me back to communion with God. I grew attentive once again for *anything* that God wanted to give. And He did. As I looked out over the ocean the water started to divide. The water congealed like Jell-O and then stood rigid as high as I could see. I saw the people of God walking through the Red Sea with astonished looks on their faces. What a dramatic move by God in the Exodus story! There were really no special effects on the beach that day, but that would have been really cool!

God's people make it to the other shore and praise breaks forth. Euphoria. Fear and death removed by the power of God. Loved ones, Exodus 15 is the first place in the Bible where a *psalm* interrupts the *narrative*. Israel's story is punctuated with praise. I was surrounded on the beach by ancient Israel singing and glorifying God. I "will sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted...the Lord is my strength and song, he has become my salvation...the Lord will reign forever and ever" (15.1-2, 18). I wanted to join in the moment. God had interrupted the narrative of my life with a moment of deep praise. I jumped up and danced my happy dance (Want to see it? I don't think so).

Spiritual retreats can sometimes end with pain, but not that day. I had hoped that at the end of the silent retreat my first audible words would be words of praise simply because of who God is. For me, the silent retreat was like a new birth and you know what a baby needs; a loving, faithful parent who guides and provides, who hears your cries and knows how to **heal your brokenness**. We are fond of seeing the Exodus as the birth of the people of God. As baby Israel grows, like a loving father, God would **take them by the hand** and lead them. In my mind, I raised **my hand to God** for him to grasp and lead me. I had just been born again (*again*) and infants have much to learn. That day on the beach I entered the wonder of God's story again. You are here to do the same, right? You want to know what happens next? We leave the seashore and enter the desert **(SCENE 1)**

²² Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter...²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"

²⁵ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet..."If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who HEALS you."

Have you noticed that God has lots of names in the Bible, e.g., EL-BERITH (bear-ith) – God of the Covenant; EL SHADDAI; God Almighty; YAHWEH-JIREH – The Lord will Provide.

The name for God in our text today is **Yahweh Rophe** (row-phay). I am God your Rophe, the God who heals (healer). Do you picture God in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck? I am God, your doctor. That will work, but my image of God as Healer has far less to do with what he wears than what he holds in his hand, a needle and thread, a sewing kit. I am God who sews up wounds, who sews up relationships, who sews up division, who sews up the soul, who sews up all your brokenness. I can mend the body, the heart, the mind. I can mend a community, I can mend a land, if it is broken, I can mend it, I am Yahweh Rophe, your healer. I can make you as good as new. *Give me your hand*. The next verse says,

²⁷ **Then they** came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water. (An Oasis in the desert; a glimpse of the Promise Land).

SCENE 2:

¹The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin...on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt...“If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt...but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

⁴**Then the** LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you...”¹⁰ While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud...¹³ that evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning, there was a layer of dew around the camp.

SCENE 3:

^{17.1} The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin...they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarreled...⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink”...“Is the LORD [THE HEALER] among us or not?”

As we enter this story, what should we learn about the God who heals, who mends, who fixes, who perfects? What is our appropriate response? May I suggest the following about the God who heals:

1. God’s Healing is An Act of a Moment

I am not so hard on these people. Yes, they grumble and they will even quarrel by the third scene, but so would I and I suspect you would too. Three days without water in the desert is serious business. Dehydration and disillusionment increase. Dancing and delightful praise decline to faint whispers and a cadence resembling a turtle. The emotional trauma only exacerbates the physical. They are scared. But the stories in Exodus are not about grumbling people, they are about the God who heals, who acts in a moment (in the blink of an eye) to bring healing (water, manna and quail). A block of wood instantly purifies water. Food falls from the sky.

Fast forward in the biblical story. All four Gospels testify to Jesus' ability to heal instantly. He says to the official, go home, your son will live and he learns that his boy was healed at that very moment (John 5). A woman reached out just to touch the tassel of Jesus and she was healed at that moment (Matthew 9.22). A woman cries out to Jesus to heal her sick daughter, and she is healed instantly (Matthew 15.28). A sick boy is brought to Jesus and he is healed instantly (Matthew 17.18). Jesus cares and heals the physical, emotional, spiritual. He mends purpose and restores vision declaring a God-centered universe. Loved Ones, God's healing CAN happen instantly.

My *biological* dad was given a beer when he was 13 years old. A bunch of older guys thought it was a cool thing to do. My Dad never quit drinking and it enslaved him. Alcoholics live to drink and drink to live. My Christian Mom taught my brother and me to love him, not despise him; to try to help, not hate. We learned to mourn his brokenness. He tried to quit several times. When I was away at Bible college, my Dad went through DT's (delirium tremens) a second time..... [**finish story**]

I want you to hear my Mom. My Dad drank for 41 years. My Mom testified to her kids and to her church, years of brokenness healed in an instant. My Dad died sober *holding on to the hand of Jesus*. Stories of God's instant healing are multiplied in the church. Keep *holding the hand of the one who can heal instantly*.

God's healing is not only an act of a moment, **God's healing is the Hope of Eternity**

Loved Ones, what God wants to teach us in these stories is that the people of God were looking through the glasses of their own circumstances to base their understanding of reality. They have not learned that even though "they are in a desert with no food or water, God is above their circumstances" (Peter Enns). When circumstances break them, would they make an appointment with the Healer? Would they believe in his power to heal? Would they persevere or would their brokenness overwhelm them? Would they keep *holding his hand*? I'm not so hard on these people. Some of the most faithful and spiritual people I know are in this place today and we struggle, don't we? Just ask Job and Jeremiah, Peter and Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Teresa.

Fast forward in the biblical story. Some would *keep holding his hand*. The healer would heal many. There would be dancing and singing on the seashore once again. Narrative once again punctuated with doxology, Listen to the hymn writers

of the OT: “Praise the Lord, O my soul; may I never forget the one who heals **all** my diseases” (Ps 103.3). “O Lord my God, I called to you for help and your healed me” (30.2). The Lord gathers the exiles, “He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds” (147.3). Job confesses, “In God’s hand is healing (Job 5.17-18). **Jeremiah sings**, “Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise (Jer. 17.14). God promises faithful Israel, “I will bring health and healing, I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security” (Jer 33.6).

Fast forward in the biblical story again. The story of God the healer does not end at Sinai. The story of God the healer does not end at the cross or even the resurrection. In fact, in the book of Revelation, the finale of Scripture, we are back on a seashore again. **John writes**, “And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast...They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: Great and marvelous are your deeds Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages...(15.1-4). John speaks of those individuals who *refused to let go of the hand that heals*. It looked like the dragon (satan) would win, broken people strewn everywhere, but you are mistaken. I told you, God can mend any brokenness.

The story of God the healer ends in a place where his sewing is done. He is no longer holding a sewing kit, He now holds a Kleenex box. One tissue from that box will be used to wipe away every past tear. He welcomes you to a new reality where **there will** be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will be passed away” (21.4). The whole cosmos healed, mended, perfected.

My step dad of 32 years died in October (10/27/16); Saturday; 6.45 pm; [Mom 2/22/17]. He walked with Jesus. We talked for 45 minutes in our last conversation. I think he knew he was close to death. I wrote down some of the things he said on sticky notes. “God is nothing but Good.” “Peace will come like a river.” “I will always have you in my heart.” “It is well with my soul.” Joy overflows until the end of time. We didn’t miss a thing that God wants to.... (I couldn’t make out the next word – no doubt in my mind it was a word of praise). One of my favorites, “Discombobulate will not be a word in heaven.” Two days before he died, he is still my spiritual mentor. He would say to us, “*Reach up for the hand that heals*, never let go.”

God's healing is an act of a moment, it is hope of eternity, and a Prayer of Faith away.

What struck me when I read these stories is how “easy” it seemed to be. 3 days out, they cry out, we're thirsty, boom, water. Thanks God! (an oasis to boot). Two months out, they cry out “we are hungry,” boom, sustenance falls from the sky. Thanks God! God doesn't even punish them for their lack of faith, he simply heals the situation. I know this is an over-simplification. It is never **that easy**, is it? It wasn't for Israel. In fact, a generation will suffer and die in the desert (39 years and ten months to go).

I need to confess to you. I have asked angrily, why doesn't God just heal people and be done with it? I have heard the cries and have made cries for hurting people and Goliath size brokenness is not fixed. The first hospital call I ever made as a ministry major in Bible College was on a teenager named Lisa Eynon. I prayed confidently for her healing from leukemia. She died. I need to confess to you, I have met the monster of duplicity in my heart, “this one deserves to be healed, not this one.” My own daughter did not deserve the pain afflicted on her nor did she deserve the length of infirmity. I've been so messed up emotionally that I've tried to make myself cry (prayers of supplication would not go unanswered). God saw Hezekiah's tears and healed him. Maybe I'm just selfish. I've gone through seasons of not asking God to heal. *I prefer the safety of doubt over the risk of disappointment.* I have said to God, “it is just not fair that this person suffers so much.” “Is brokenness more important to you than healing?” “Do you intend certain people to be rooted in their sufferings?” **Answer Jeremiah**, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? (Jeremiah 8.22).

I've heard it a million times, “it's because of the fall Fred.” My head agrees, but that answer has never helped my heart much. What I need is a trusted friend to talk to. I need a trusted Divine friend. I need a merciful and loving Father to *take me by the hand*. I need Him to assure me of His sewing skills.

I still believe, I would not be standing before you if I didn't. The words of John 6.68 minister to my soul. Many were deserting Jesus and he asks his disciples, “Do you want to leave too?” Simon Peter replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We believe that you are the holy one of God.”

My friends, what can we say to each other when we are exiled in a desert of brokenness facing all kinds of challenges? There is direction for us in our text today.

In between the disease and the healing:

1. Listen to God's Voice

After the miracle of water, God said, "Now listen to the voice of God your healer." Something happens when God's word is read, studied, reflected upon, listened to. Listening creates space for God to work, to heal. And as you listen, when the Holy Spirit prompts the moment, punctuate your narrative with honest petition and passionate praise. David ran from cave to cave for, I'm guessing, a decade writing psalms.

In between the pain and the healing

2. Do what is right. /

After the miracle of water, God told them, "Do what is right in the eyes of God your Healer." That is, live an obedient, virtuous life.

Could an act of simple obedience help you persevere, could it bring the balm of Gilead? Could an act of mercy given to someone else in pain be a part of your healing? I believe so.

In between the discouragement and the healing

3. Anticipate a fresh view of God's presence.

In between starvation and sustenance, in the middle of the desert, came a fresh view of His glory. "While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of God appearing in the cloud." In the middle of trying to run away from his broken life, Jacob got to see what is always true. Jacob surprisingly acknowledges, "God is here, but I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place" (Gen 28). Even if the place is a fiery furnace, His presence may be found (ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). James writes, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. (4.8). God is always drawing near to us in many ways, and often we are unaware of His gracious presence and healing hand.

In between the confusion and the healing

4. Keep talking to God, keep praying.

Moses cried out to God repeatedly on behalf of the people. What if, *what if*, what stands in between disease and God's healing is my prayer?

Healing belongs to the intercessors: You do not know how many people have been strengthened because you asked God to stitch them up; how many people have been healed because you prayed for their bodies; how many spiritual runaways have come home because you prayed for their souls; how many hearts restored because you asked. Healing belongs to the intercessors.

I need to confess one more thing. I have had my moments when what I just suggested for you to do sounded like trivial religious platitudes. They are like a giant religious pacifier. Superficial answers for deep, difficult, unresolved theodicy questions. They are not! They speak of the way God stitches us back together. **The one who keeps holding his hand remarkably goes deeper into His unshakable love, peace, wisdom, and healing.**

Can I ask you something personal now? Where is **your** brokenness, your pain? Is it in your heart? Your mind? **Come Lord Rophe.** Is it in your body? Is it in your home? **Come Lord Rophe.** Is it in your ministry? Is it in your church? **Come Lord Rophe.** Is it with a friend or somebody sitting in this room? **Come Lord Rophe.** Is it at work? Is it on-line? **Come Lord Rophe.**

Conclusion:

That day 20 years ago, I grabbed his hand at Daytona Beach. We started to walk, his hand on my shoulder. He pauses and kneels down beside his little boy. He looks me in the eye as only a loving Father can do and says, “Freddy J,” I know it’s fun to dance on the beach, but you will be in the desert. You will be broken, sick, discouraged and in pain. He reaches into this pocket and pulls out a sewing kit. Son, you know what I can do with this. You’ve seen me sew. I can mend anything. I will mend everything. Remember my name. ***I am God, your Healer.***