

Texts: Psalm 40:1-5; John 4:46-54

Subject: Jesus Heals

Theme: With a Word

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 6, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV

This week I've been thinking a lot about all the things we believe. In our Bible study a couple of weeks ago we talked about angels and many of us believe that angels show up in our lives, as they do in scripture, to deliver messages, to protect us, and to serve on behalf of God. Some believe in star signs and horoscopes, folk wisdom, or long held superstitions. Most of us believe in something. Whether you are life-long Lutheran, or a person who has spent time in different spiritual homes, or one who gleans wisdom from a variety of traditions, the beliefs we carry can shape who we are and what we do.

I don't know how many of you have seen the Apple TV+ show, *Ted Lasso*, but it's a great show that really caught on during the pandemic shut down in 2020, with its message of kindness, teamwork, and positivity. Ted Lasso is an American football coach from Kansas who gets a job coaching professional football - that is, soccer, in England, and works to bring together a divided team and a town of supporters. There is no shortage of wisdom that Ted shares with his players and friends, but the main message to the team, is expressed in the one word mantra posted over the coach's office door: "BELIEVE."

Their team has lost all hope. They are on the brink of being relegated, demoted to the league below, and are lost. Without believing that success is possible, they cannot climb out of the pit they're in. I won't ruin the show for you, you have to watch it. If they want to succeed, they have to believe.

What we believe has the power to shape the way we see the world, and ourselves, our relationships, and our actions. Our beliefs may change over time, or they may grow stronger. Sometimes we believe things that cannot be proven to be true. Sometimes we believe things are completely false, unhelpful, or damaging. To believe in something can be dangerous. Take a minute, and think about something that you believe. Our deeply held beliefs engage the same areas in our brains as when we think about ourselves, our identities, as well as our emotions.¹ This may be why it's so difficult to change someone's mind about a core belief, even if it is not what we would consider, "true."

Some believe in democracy. Some believe the earth is flat. Some believe in love at first sight. Some believe in aliens. Maybe you believe that if you do good, good things will happen to you. Maybe you believe in speaking out for justice or teaching the next generation or random acts of kindness. While we see church affiliation declining in America since the 1960's, as of 2018, 87% of Americans say they believe in God. I'm sure they believe very many different things about God, but that's interesting at least. Some believe that God has judged them, or that God is one name for a divine consciousness, or that God is detached from the created world, or an angry parent in the sky who seeks to punish us. What we believe about God shapes the way we practice our faith, serve our neighbors, and care for the world around us.

Each week when we gather here, we speak out loud what we believe: we use the words of the Apostles' Creed, or sometimes the Nicene Creed, on festival days. Once a

¹ "A New Brain Study sheds light on why it can be so hard to change someone's political beliefs" Accessed at <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2016/12/28/14088992/brain-study-change-minds>, 2/5/22

year we bring out the Athanasian Creed, a much longer statement of faith that we use on Trinity Sunday. That Apostles Creed starts with “I Believe, ” but it’s not just about me. We say it together. We speak those words, even if sometimes we struggle with some of these core ideas of the Christian faith. That’s okay. We hear them spoken to us and over us, and with the church throughout the world, that has been using some form of this creed for centuries. What we believe connects us.

Jesus is back in Cana, the same place where he did the first of his *signs*, turning water into wine at a Jewish wedding. Some didn’t know what had happened. Some saw and understood what he did, and *believed*. Then, passing through Samaria, he met a woman at a well, and she and many others there came to believe. Today a man comes to Jesus because he has a son who needs to be healed. But what does he believe?

This royal official travels a great distance - 18 miles or so - to find Jesus. This may be the same one we hear about in Matthew Mark, and Luke - the centurion who comes to have his servant healed. In John’s gospel it’s the child of this official - likely a Gentile - not a Jewish person, not a Samaritan, but one who is in the service of King Herod. Jesus hears him. Much like he did at the wedding - Jesus seems to get a little agitated or snarky. Remember how he responded to his mother, “what is it to you, or to me?” when she asked him to do something. Jesus first answers the man, saying “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” Is that a statement or a question?

It’s much easier for us to believe what we see, and harder to believe in things that are beyond our experience, vision, or understanding. Like a virus. We can’t see it.

Does it really exist? Should we trust these scientists? Some have struggled to know what to believe. We need healing too.

This official from Capernaum persists, and Jesus heals the child, saying “Go, your son will live.” It might have been surprising to the man that Jesus wouldn’t even go to the town, or have to enter the house to heal the boy. John tells us “the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and started on his way.” Jesus’ word can do a lot. John’s already identified Jesus as the Word made flesh, who lived among us, who moved into the neighborhood. The Word is alive and speaking there, bringing life and healing. But even though the man couldn’t see that yet, he trusted the word that Jesus spoke.

This week, we heard of the cancellation of the ELCA Youth Gathering in Minneapolis. There were 10,000 students registered to attend, a smaller number than the expected 30,000 from past gatherings, and it’s a loss to our church. This event was one that helped to showcase the stories of faith, music, relationships, and service that become memorable moments, not just for high school age youth, but for leaders, volunteers, and the cities that host us. We want our children to see and have those moments where they hear the word and believe, too. Thankfully, there will be a Gathering in two years. And this summer we have students going to Leadership Lab with Marissa and great leaders from across the church this summer in Illinois. We’ll host Vacation Bible school here in July and go to Confirmation camp in Flagstaff. Hearing the Word builds our faith. Hearing it with others who we love and trust creates faith-filled memories that last a lifetime.

We're all here because someone believed it was a good idea to built a resort town in the desert. We're in this church because someone believed there needed to be a church on this corner. We're *still* here because we believe in the Word that is Jesus. We have heard that we are forgiven. We have heard that Jesus died on the cross. We have heard that he rose again from the dead. Some of us *have* seen how believing in that word has strengthened our families, renewed relationships, mended our broken hearts, and inspired us to serve others in Jesus' name. We have believed what we have heard.

It hasn't always been easy to believe. Maybe it's been harder when the world around us seems to go on hurting, and people get sick and die, and people are afraid, and argue over everything and the threat or war is in the news, and the same power of evil that enslaved nations and killed countless others still persists in dark corners and out in the open 2000 years after Jesus walked the earth. We want to see healing, but even when we don't we can believe. We believe in goodness, we believe in forgiveness, we believe in listening, and learning, and helping. We can believe because Jesus' word is good.

The man could have walked away, lost, in fear, upset, or angry. Maybe he expected something different from Jesus. Maybe his friends told him not to waste his time, not to take the trip. Maybe the disciples tried to push this outsider away. But instead he believed. As he made his way home, his servants ran out to tell him the good news, the boy had recovered. The fever broke around 1 in the afternoon. And then, the rest of the household believed. We don't know the exact details of *what* they believed,

but they knew there was a sick boy healed, and Jesus spoke a word of healing that made it happen.

Jesus helps. That's what he does. We don't read stories of Jesus condemning people, okay there was a fig tree once, but it came back. Jesus brings healing with a word, and brings life wherever he goes. As we believe, together, here at church, in book clubs, classrooms, and coffee shops - in relationships, on teams, and as we share the stories of Jesus in our healing, we find our place in the family of faith that has extended through generations. We believe, and go on our way.

Amen.