

Dear fellow redeemed, As I get older, something I hear and think more often is that things used to be better, things used to be easier. But often people used to (and still do) pin their success on the favour or disfavour of God. It used to be so easy. If something bad happened to you, it was God punishing you. God was seen as a God of judgment and vengeance. When Job lost everything, he's friends tried to console him by telling him that he obviously sinned and God was punishing him. After David's affair with Bathsheba, the child from the affair died—a judgment of God. A person deserved to be blind, lame, a leper, or sick, because they had made God mad.

Things change when God is seen as a God of love. Suddenly we find ourselves asking, “Why?” If God is a God of love why did he allow his chosen people, the Jews, almost to be exterminated? Why did God allow people to die in that school shooting, or that natural disaster? Why did God allow Uncle Sid to have Alzheimer', or the neighbors three-year-old to drown in the pool? Why?

People today are not the only ones who have poised the “Why” question. The early Christians struggled, with their newfound faith, to understand sickness, persecution, and death. In our gospel lesson today, we see Jesus acting in the face of sickness and death. Luke used his account of Jesus to give comfort and hope to people who are hurting. The hope and comfort are not in the possibility of miracles but are based on something much more profound than that.

The first character that we see in this story is a Roman Centurion. He is described as a god fearer and even is accompanied by a few Jews who serve as character references. The fact that he is a Roman is significant. The Centurion could have sent for Roman physicians. He could have tried to bring Rome's power to bear in the healing of his servant. But the Centurion realized

that Rome’s power and authority was limited. Even though Caesar claimed to be the “Lord of lords,” “King of kings,” “Son of God” and “Savior,” he was none of those. This Roman realized that there was someone greater than Rome, and his name was Jesus.

The Centurion understood who Jesus was. Jesus was a man with ultimate authority. He could cast out demons, still storms, feed thousands, and heal the sick. The Centurion’s statement of faith, that Jesus had the authority, earned him words of praise by Jesus. Relying on Jesus’ authority and control was a true action of faith.

One of the areas in which we Christians struggle is to trust in God’s authority and to realize comfort and hope in resting in that authority. We get so busy telling God what we need and what we want God to do, that find ourselves placing our faith not in God but in a possible miracle. Even though Jesus does heal the Centurion’s servant, the more profound message of this lesson is that Jesus has the authority in any circumstance.

Another point, which I think Luke is trying to make, is the importance of community. The slave doesn’t approach Jesus himself. He’s on his death bed. The Centurion approaches Jesus on behalf of his servant.

There are times when people in need can’t pray. They are too devastated, sick, depressed, or hopeless to approach God. It is at this point that the community of believers really shines. We can pray for others; we can intercede. We can believe and trust in God’s power and presence. Focused on God rather than the pain, the struggle, or the mountain of obstacles we can bring peace, comfort, hope and strength into the situations. Our presence along with our love of both God and people can transform that little part of the world.

Luke wanted to make sure that we didn't put our hope in a possible miracle, or in the power of our faith. To keep our attention focused on Jesus—our true hope—he tells the story of the widow at Nain.

The story of the widow of Nain does have the concept of faith in it. The people mourning the death of the young man didn't search for Jesus and ask him to come and help. Neither the widow, nor obviously her son, are said to have faith. Yet Jesus is present. Jesus enters the situation uninvited.

Yes, a miracle does take place. The plight and poverty of the widow is reversed. Her son is raised from the dead. Still, that isn't the kernel of truth and hope in this story—Jesus is. His presence is not limited by our faith, our station in life, or even the degree of our need. Jesus—the one who has the ultimate authority breaks into our world. Nothing can keep him out. Strength, comfort and peace come in our acknowledgement that Jesus is with us.

As people reflect on all the horrible things that you see daily on the news – shootings, wars, threats, tariffs, uncertainty and danger, some people have intimated that one of the reasons these things happened was because God was not present. God, they claim, had been forced to leave because public prayer is no longer allowed in school, a manger scene can no longer be displayed on public grounds, and any shred of Christianity has been purged from our government. Do we really believe that some human law can prevent God from doing what he wants to do? What audacious hubris!

God is in our schools and government, just like he is in our sicknesses and our health, economic downturns or upturns, our promotions or terminations, our victories and our defeats. God shows up uninvited and unannounced. God love knows no bounds.

Miracles do happen! They happen all the time, and I've been privileged to witness some myself. I can't promise more miracles, however. What I can

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promise and proclaim is that God is present, and he has the authority to accomplish his will. We can give God thanks and praise for these truths, and when we struggle to trust, we can pray for each other. Amen