

## FAITH HEALING: THROUGH THE ROOF

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Mark 2:1-12

The chronicle of the paralyzed man is one of my favorite passages in scripture. Like you, I am no doubt drawn to the strong visual components of this story—the crowded house, the friends tearing a hole in the roof, the man on the mat lowered down to Jesus. It is a story that commands our imagination.

This passage takes place at the start of the second chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel moves quickly. In the first chapter, Jesus is baptized and then spends 40 days in the wilderness tempted by Satan. He returns to begin his ministry in Galilee announcing, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.* Jesus then calls his disciples and travels through the region of Galilee preaching and healing. Mark reports that his *fame began to spread.*

Why did his fame spread? Because his preaching fed people who were starving, who were hungry for the word of God. Between his preaching and his miracles, people flock to hear this man of God.

After one particular preaching tour, Jesus returns to his home-base in the town of Capernaum. The crowds catch up with him and mob his home. One group arrives accompanying a man who is paralyzed. Four of this group carry the man on his mat. We can assume that they were bringing their friend to the one they had heard that could heal him. They came to Capernaum, but because of the throng around the house, the group is unable to get their friend near to Jesus. Since desperate times call for desperate measures, they get creative. They climb up on the roof and dig through it.

Roofs on the homes in that place would have been constructed with flat, wooden beams spaced about 3 feet apart. These beams would be densely covered with branches or thatch or possibly palm branches. That layer of branches would be sealed with a mud mixture. These roofs often served as extra rooms in the home—an outdoor living space, a cool place to sleep on a hot night. There would be exterior stairs or a ladder leading up to the roof.

The group accompanying the paralyzed man, because they could not get near Jesus through the front door, climbed up on top of the house, and they dug a hole through the roof, burrowing through the mud and thatch. You can imagine the scene inside with dust and chunks of dirt raining down on the people's head, and probably on Jesus as well. The group carves a hole large enough for the paralyzed man to be lowered down on his mat. I assume that the people inside held up their

hands to receive him. As the gospel reports, *When Jesus saw the faith of the friends, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'*

The story should right there. These friends bring the paralyzed man to Jesus and Jesus forgives him of his sins. But that is not how they hoped this would turn out. The friends brought the man expecting a healing, not forgiveness. You can imagine them thinking, "We carried him all the way here and now we've got to carry him back." They knew this it was a possibility, but they believed Jesus. They believed enough to carry their friend. They hoped for a miracle.

What is interesting about this event is that Jesus acts not on the faith of the paralyzed man—the man who is healed—but on the faith of his friends. As Mark tells us, *When Jesus saw their faith*, he responded.

It is like when I baptize an infant. I don't interrogate the child. I don't ask "Do you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior?" No. I ask these questions to those who *bring* the child—its parents or grandparents—the ones who carry him to me. It is on their faith that we baptize little ones.

Jesus doesn't interrogate the man on the mat. Jesus doesn't ask any questions. Jesus acts on the faith of the friends—the faith that inspired them to transport this man who knows how many miles and then to rip into a roof desperate to get close to the one with authority. And then, the one with authority does what he came to do—he forgives sins. He forgives sins to prepare us to enter into the Kingdom of God. When our sins are absolved, we are ready for the kingdom.

Although the story should end with the forgiveness of sins, it continues. There are scribes present watching all of this drama unfold. Not surprisingly, they are offended by Jesus' claim to forgive sins. In their professional opinion, Jesus' actions constitute unadulterated blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins. I would have the same reaction if someone walked in off the street and started serving communion, or performing a baptism, or forgiving sins.

Jesus perceives what they are thinking and challenges them asking, *Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?* And then he puts this question to them, *Which is easier, to say to this [paralyzed man], "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"?*

That is a good question. Which is easier? I have no idea because for me, for you, both are impossible. We can't forgive sins and we can't bring about miraculous healings. For Jesus, it seems that forgiving is not only the more difficult task but also the more significant. Forgiving is Jesus' mission, his purpose. The ability to heal—to say stand-up—is a side-effect of forgiving. Jesus uses his ability to heal to substantiate his power to forgive. In other words, Jesus has said, *Your sins are forgiven, and to prove I mean business, here, you are also healed.* The people who

witness this are all *amazed* and they *glorify God* saying, *We have never seen anything like this!* And, no, they had not. They had never witnessed a healing of this magnitude and had never witnessed anyone's sins being forgiven.

Although, these people had all sought forgiveness, their religion, as it was practiced with its laws and requirements, did not make it easy for the faithful to develop an intimate relationship with this God. There always seemed to be some obstacle in their way—a sacrifice to make, an animal to slaughter, a meal to prepare. By forgiving sins, Jesus removes all the obstacles of religion clearing a path for those hungry for God. The scribes, not surprisingly, object to Jesus' claim. So, he heals the man to demonstrate that he does in fact possess God's power and authority.

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Lent. For this season, I will be preaching a series of sermons entitled Faith Healing in which I look at different accounts of healings and ask what we can learn about how God heals us.

The season of Lent is a journey from sin to the cross. The core of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection is the ultimate act of healing. Through the cross, God heals God's son, the one who came to save us, and demonstrates God's great love for us.

The question that our reading puts before us today is this: "Are we paralyzed?" The man Jesus heals was indeed physically disabled. He could not walk. There should be no question about that. We, on the other hand, may not be physically disabled like that man, but are we disabled spiritually? Are we paralyzed with fear, or doubt, or insecurity? Jesus has come and given the command to stand up. So why don't we? What is holding us back? Where is our faith?

However, as we see in this story, it is not always about our faith. The paralyzed man was supported by the passionate faith of his friends. It is possible that we become so spiritually paralyzed that we need our friends, our community to help us stand. That is what a church does. It is a place where people support one another in faith as we seek the kingdom. Those who are stronger are tasked with carrying those who are struggling.

I want this season of Lent to be for us a journey of spiritual healing so that when we arrive at Easter, we can appreciate the magnitude of God's glory.