

Salvation by Surprise

Mark 2:1-12

I am so glad to back here, with you and in this pulpit. I am also grateful, and a little overwhelmed, by your kindness and concern for me over the last three weeks as I have been ill. Your patience with me, and with the bumpy start we've now had to my time with you, has encouraged me and healed me. I will never forget your generosity and your kindness. Thank you.

I am generally not someone who takes much time away from my work. Although you might not know it from my first couple of months here, I am ridiculously healthy; and I enjoy and need my work too much to want to be away from it for long. Just once before, when I was going through a difficult time of personal transition, I took a renewal leave from the church I was leading at the time. I started that time away with an eight-day silent retreat at a Jesuit retreat center in Colorado. Every long, silent day was broken by just one hour with a spiritual director. In that hour, she guided me each day to focus on one story from the life of Jesus, and on imagining myself actually *in* an encounter with Jesus, as if I were one of the characters in that story.

This was not so easy for me, actually. The first couple of days, as I left her office with just a few verses to reflect on, I'd think, "That's it? You want me to spend the next 16 waking hours on just that?" I would come back to her the next day with what I thought were brilliant analytical insights, she'd say to me, "I'm not asking you to make a sermon out of this story; I'm asking you to imagine yourself in it." She wanted me to just *be* in those stories of Jesus responding to people, so that I could begin to see my life through his eyes...which, it turns out, is an entirely different thing than I had known how to do.

Even for someone who takes the Bible seriously, this was different. I believe the Bible holds great wisdom about how people have seen and known God, and about the ways God shows up in human life. I think the Bible always has something to say to us *now* about how God is present in the world. But often, I think, we look to the Bible—whether it is the stories of Jesus or the Old Testament—hoping it will have some holy meaning for us, and we come away disappointed, because the meaning somehow seems too mysterious, too obscure for us to see our own lives in it. But I learned in my retreat that when I practiced just *sitting* with those words—sometimes for hours, coming back to them again and again, putting myself in the story—I could hear God speaking to *my* life in a way I had never heard before.

One of the passages I spent some time with that week is the story we read this morning, the story of the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him through the roof so that he could get close enough to Jesus to be healed. You know this story. In fact, you may have heard it often enough that you've stopped taking much of it in. Guy wants to get healed; room is crowded; friends lower him through the roof; he talks to Jesus; gets healed. Got it. We can't relate, exactly, but we know the story.

When I let myself linger over that story a little longer, I heard three things that I'd never noticed before, three things that have helped me make sense of my own life in some difficult times, including the last few weeks.

First, I notice that the way for this man to find healing was to go *down*, not up. The way he got to Jesus was not to climb higher; it was to let himself be lowered down onto the floor. This is not the way most of us try to get to God, or to our own healing. We want success, to be living lives of constant improvement, a way of spirituality that feels like ascent, not *de*-scent. But Jesus' way of healing is not self-improvement. It's transformation, which always requires our willingness not to move *above* the low spots in our lives, but to go fully *through* them. Because the story of our faith—Jesus' story—is that no matter how far down our lives take us—even to death, we will find God's presence, again—in the very depths of those hard times.

I have spent so many years of my life trying to lift myself into being what I thought God wanted me to be, putting my best foot forward, trying to make myself strong. This story reminds me that when I'm relying on how well I can make *myself* strong and whole, I'm often moving away from God, not toward the place where my healing can happen.

Secondly, I noticed, for the first time, Mark doesn't actually say that it was the man's *friends* who put ropes on his mat and dropped him over the side of that hole in the roof. Maybe they looked like friends afterward, but when they did it, they might have been family members who were tired of getting this guy a drink of water every time he got thirsty and couldn't get it himself. Or ex-friends who were fed up with his depression and self-pity. Whoever they were, and whatever their motivations, they got that guy with the un-usable legs exactly where he needed to go. With good motives or bad—and maybe it doesn't much matter which—they kept pushing him down until he found himself on the ground, in front of the only One who could give him the healing he needed.

I know a little more now than I did a few weeks ago about what it feels like to get lowered—*reduced*—by the circumstances of my life. You know something about this too, I bet. There are people and things we just can't seem to get control over; bad breaks or physical limitations or stubborn obstacles that mount up until they just feel like too much. We can't find quite enough energy or magic to fix ourselves completely. All those things we tend to think of as enemies. But maybe those things that felt like they were breaking us—all those reversals that didn't look like friends at all—those are the things that are carrying us down to the place where healing could finally happen. That's where God always is—not *above* our weaknesses and disabilities, but *in* the very depths of them. Whatever gets me there I ought to welcome as a friend.

Finally, I notice the messiness of this story. You know, removing a piece of the roof to drop a hospital bed into a crowded house wasn't normal for people in Jesus' time, any more than it sounds normal to us. When he wrote this story, Mark wanted us to stop there for a minute, and let the scene sink in. Imagine the debris and dust that must have fallen as they pried those tiles off the roof. The murmur, and maybe even shouts, as people looked up to figure out what was going on. It was noisy, disorderly, maybe even a little chaotic. Maybe that's the way an encounter with Jesus, the beginning of a healing story, will always feel to us. A little out-of-control, not at all what we would have expected.

Someone pointed out to me once that if you look carefully at all the healing stories in the Gospels, what you see is that almost every time Jesus healed someone, it made somebody else unhappy, even mad. Always, there was someone who was fighting against the way Jesus went about doing his healing work. “You’re not supposed to heal on the Sabbath,” they said; or “Don’t talk about forgiving sins; you’re not authorized to do that.” “You’re healing someone who doesn’t deserve it.” “You’re wasting your time on the wrong people.” In other words: You’re not following the script, the formula, the way we thought healing was supposed to happen. It wasn’t that they didn’t want people to be well; it’s that they had certain expectations about how God’s work should be done—properly, neatly, in line with the ways it had been done before. And then Jesus came along and refused to let his healing work be limited by what they were prepared for.

That’s what happened in this story. Jesus’ first words to the paralytic weren’t “Stand up and walk,” as you’d expect a healer to say to someone who had not walked for years. Instead, Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven.” The people in the room heard those words as presumptuous, irritating. What was he talking about? Who did he think he was? “You can’t do that!” they said; if you can heal this man’s legs, go ahead and do it. But don’t try to make this a cosmic, spiritual event!

I bet it wasn’t just the religious scholars who said, “You can’t do that.” I think the man who was there for healing must have been as surprised as they were. “Wait a minute,” he must have thought. “Sins forgiven? That’s not what I need, not what I’m here for.” It’s embarrassing enough to admit you can’t walk. Being “outed” as someone who has deeper issues, soul-level uncertainties, is an entirely different matter.

But maybe that’s the difference between healing and “getting treatment”. Maybe when you go down into your own brokenness or need as far as you have to to find God in it, you can’t choose any more what sliver of your life you’d like to have healed, and leave the rest alone. Maybe you have to let God name your disability. Maybe real healing can happen only when your whole self is exposed, when you let go of your own rules for how healing will happen.

I learned a bit about this (again) in my experience of these last few weeks. What I needed to face into, and be healed from, was not just that darn gall stone that had to be removed from my body; it was my fear of disappointing you. I wanted to be unfailingly strong and healthy, so that you would not have to be afraid again about something happening to your pastor. I can do that, I thought; I have been that healthy person, my whole life! But there I was, in the middle of a Saturday night, with pain that left me no choice about whether to be here or at the hospital on Sunday morning—a preacher’s worst nightmare. And it turns out that you were stronger than my fear allowed; that together, you and Sally Wenzel on that first Sunday, Dick Corson on the second, our wonderful youth last Sunday, could survive—and thrive—through my inability to be all that I wanted to be for you from the beginning. Like the paralyzed man in this story, I was surprised to find God’s eyes on my fears as well as on the part of my body that I thought needed healing.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, some years ago, a memoir about her decision to leave ministry in the church where she had been pastor. This is just a piece of what she said about her decision:

“If I had to name my disability, I would call it an unwillingness to fall. On the one hand, this is perfectly normal. I do not know anyone who likes to fall. But, on the other hand, this reluctance signals mistrust of the central truth of the Christian gospel: life springs from death, not only at the last but also in the many little deaths along the way. When everything you count on for protection has failed, the Divine Presence does not fail. The hands are still there—not promising to rescue, not promising to intervene—promising only to hold you no matter how far you fall. Ironically, those who try hardest *not* to fall learn this later than those people who topple more easily. The ones who find their lives [in building themselves up] are the losers, while the winners come in last.”ⁱ

I am learning the same lessons, about what it means to be whole, and to live gracefully alongside all those limitations that feel like falling. What I know now is that they have carried me not away from this ministry but toward it, to an even deeper commitment to be the church together with you, here in Campbell.

And I am praying for you the same gift: that whatever is going on in your life right now—even the circumstances that may feel like they are breaking you, dragging you down to smaller or weaker or less than what you want to be—that you’ll know that those are the very things that are carrying you to God, who is willing to break all the rules to make you whole.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*