

Scripture Readings for Sunday, 7th February 2021.

Mark 2:1-12 (NIV)

² A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, ¹¹ “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Sermon: Whole-Bodied Salvation

The story of the paralyzed man being let down through a roof in front of Jesus must be near the top of the list of Sunday School favorites.¹ It is dramatic, visual, memorable, and contains tension and conflict. In fact, this story begins a short section of controversial incidents in Mark's gospel.² It's also a story that raises complex questions about healing and forgiveness; we will consider that later. Scholars see this as two stories that Mark has cleverly sandwiched together, one about the healing of a paralyzed man and the other concerning the authority of Jesus. We need to consider *both* aspects, otherwise we will miss Mark's *key* point here, namely, that "the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins."³ And that mysterious phrase, "Son of Man" that Jesus used to reference himself is somewhat loaded too. Let's not be fooled by the familiarity of the story as we unpack it together (this morning).

Although Jesus was raised in Nazareth, his home-base for his ministry was Capernaum. It is possible that this incident took place in his own home,⁴ or possibly that of brothers Peter and Andrew, who had a house there.⁵ We don't know; but whoever owned the house was soon to need a new roof! What we *do* know, however, is that Jesus already had reputation as an exorcist and healer.⁶ So much so that the house was full to the brim - and even beyond its entranceway. As you know, the drama begins when four people come carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher, obviously wanting Jesus to heal him. They could not get into the house because of the crowd, so they went up the stairs by the side of the house that led to the flat roof, which was made of thatch and hardened mud. Such was their determination that they tore a hole in the roof above Jesus and then lowered the paralytic on the stretcher down in front of him.

If that isn't shocking enough, hear what Jesus says next, "Son, your *sins are forgiven!*"⁷ Wait a moment! The man needed physical *healing*, *why* is Jesus talking about sin and forgiveness?⁸ If you or I went to a medical specialist today and they said, "Your sins are forgiven," we might get angry! This story is *not* making an explicit connection between sin and sickness,⁹ rather, it's Mark's way to introduce his story within a story. So let's see what happens next.

¹ Mark 2:1-12. See also Matt 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26.

² See Mark 2:1 - 3:6. It also contains two shocking "Son of Man" claims!

³ Mark 2:10.

⁴ The NRSV/NET implies that, although the Greek is ambiguous.

⁵ Mark 1:29. (Recall these were two fishermen.)

⁶ See Mark 1:32-34, 39-42.

⁷ Mark 2:5. Note that Jesus says this after "seeing their *faith*." It is certainly the faith of the four carriers, but what of the paralyzed man himself? (See also Mark 4:40; 5:34; 10:52 and contrast with 5:36; 9:23.) The Greek tense used implies *God* is the agent of forgiveness, hence Jesus is acting with God's authority. (Jesus does *not* explicitly say, "I forgive your sins"!)

⁸ This should *not* be seen as some kind of psychosomatic paralysis!

⁹ In contrast with John 9; James 5:15-16, there is no speculation here on the logical (or causal) relation of sin and sickness, or on the connection between healing and forgiveness. Even so, Mark is not writing (nor Jesus speaking) in a vacuum; there are Old Testament and cultural assumptions here that are not mentioned. (Addressing those assumptions are *not* Mark's aim.)

The [all-knowing] writer then says: “Now some of the experts in the Old Testament Law were sitting there, questioning *in their hearts*, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is *blasphemy!* *Who can forgive sins but God alone?*’”¹⁰ They are absolutely right!¹¹ The Old Testament makes it crystal clear that the prerogative to forgive sins belongs to God *alone*. After all, since sin is an offense *against* God, only God has the right to declare it canceled. These religious experts understandably see themselves as defending Israel’s faith and the holiness of the one true God. We need to be careful not to simply dismiss this “blasphemy” aspect of story as quaint religious baggage associated with the narrowminded. For them, blasphemy is the most serious of sins because it blurs the line between the creator and the creature, and – by implication – it dishonors God. After all, there is no suggestion in Jewish tradition the Messiah will “forgive sins!”¹² We are told that Jesus perceives that these experts are thinking such thoughts.¹³ Notice that he does not defend his comment - or the implied charge of blasphemy - with an appeal to Scripture. Instead, he asks a challenging question: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’”¹⁴ When we hear that in the 21st century, we would usually say the latter – the *healing* is the harder of the two. After all, ministers just need to mutter a few words and seemingly anything can be easily forgiven!¹⁵ In those days, it would have been thought that *forgiveness* was the *more* difficult – simply because that role *belonged* to God *alone*.¹⁶

Jesus continues, “But *so that you may know* that *the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,*”—he [then] said to the paralytic—“I tell you, stand up, take your stretcher, and go home.”¹⁷ The *authority* of Jesus is the *real* climax of Mark’s story – the miraculous healing is incidental! First, that phrase “*so that you may know*” echoes the words of Moses in front of Pharaoh,¹⁸ suggesting that these religious leaders are also hard-hearted, just like Pharaoh.¹⁹ Second, the thrust of Jesus’ argument may seem strange to us, but was a well-known and accepted rabbinical technique. It’s called the “lesser-to-greater argument.”²⁰ If the *lesser* can be *shown* to be true, then the *greater* *must* also be true. So, if

¹⁰ Mark 2:6-7. Some suggest that Peter witnessed what happened (which is very likely), and he informs “Mark.”

¹¹ See Exod 34:6-7a; Isa 43:25; 44:22. Note that nobody raises a protest about John the Baptist who Mark earlier claims to have offered “forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). So how does the problem of forgiveness of sins *now* arise?! I suggest Mark makes an error in 1:4 and that John’s baptism was one of *repentance*, *not* forgiveness; see Matt 3:2, 11. This “mistake” may have been confusing to Mark’s *readers*, but this may explain why this apparent “problem” is not raised on this occasion.

¹² This is a priestly role is *delegated* by God for a select few (with a heredity element) and forgiveness arises via sacrifice in the Temple (at Jerusalem). Note that Jesus is *not* claiming to be the Messiah here, but Mark told his readers that in Mark 1:1.

¹³ Mark 2:8; is this divine (or prophetic) insight because God’s Spirit is upon him (Mark 1:10), or is this human intuition?

¹⁴ Mark 2:9.

¹⁵ This is not flippant or mocking; and I (as a minister) affirm forgiveness week by week after the Prayer of Confession! I suggest this story reminds us to be mindful not to trivialize the cost or nature of divine forgiveness.

¹⁶ To be sure, healings were special – but their origin need not necessarily be divine. See, for example, Acts 8:4-24.

¹⁷ Mark 2:10-11.

¹⁸ See Exod 9:13–14; 8:10, 22, 10:2.

¹⁹ Mark 3:5 confirms that perspective.

²⁰ Technically, the “*qal wahomer*” argument: from “light to heavy.” (See, for example, Matt 7:11; Luke 12:24) Note: the experts in the Law (“scribes”) do *not* challenge the logic or validity of Jesus’ argument.

Jesus can heal the man, which can be immediately demonstrated, then his pronouncement of forgiveness is also valid, (even though it cannot be empirically verified). Third, *both* miracles and forgiveness come from God. If the man was *not* healed, then it would be very easily proved that Jesus was *not* sent by God, but was a false-prophet. Note there are two separate - but related - acts here, and Mark makes it clear that the healing is a sign that the man has been forgiven. Moreover, God *has* demonstrably bestowed *divine authority upon Jesus*,²¹ not just to *heal*, but to *forgive sins*.²² This is radical, controversial stuff and this is just one of those incidents that sets Jesus on a collision course with the religious authorities.

What happened next? The man got up, rolled up his stretcher and went out in front of all these witnesses. We are told, "They were all *amazed* and glorified *God*, saying, 'We have *never* seen anything like this!'"²³ At the beginning he was *carried* in and the story ends with him *carrying* his mat out.²⁴ At the word of Jesus, "The passive victim has become an active participant in life."²⁵ However, note that although Jesus has been the agent, *God* is the one who is rightfully glorified.

There are three other things we need to consider from this story:

First, this is the first time in Mark's gospel that he makes reference to the phrase, or title, "Son of Man." He does this 14 times in all, and they have various nuanced and important meanings, which I won't dwell on here.²⁶ It's a loaded phrase that alludes to a "Son of Man" figure in a popular vision in Daniel 7. Jesus never says outright, "I am the Son of Man," but no one doubts that he is deliberately making that connection. This expression, which is used by all the gospel writers, points to Jesus having a *special* status, one that is – ironically - linked to *God*, rather than human beings. It is *this* "Son of Man" who has *authority on earth to forgive sins*.²⁷

Second, in addition to the charge of blasphemy, there is a power play implied here. Peasants of rural Palestine, to whom Jesus ministered, often suffered excessive taxation - even the confiscation of their land - resulting in poverty. Some religious leaders would say that their plight, including sickness, was because they had "sinned."²⁸ Their only recourse was the Temple, because forgiveness in those days could only take place at the Temple in Jerusalem. And sacrifices cost money – thereby increasing their

²¹ At his baptism; Mark 1:10-11.

²² This being the case, the religious experts' rejection of Jesus is, in effect, slandering God! (See also John 5:23.)

²³ Mark 2:12.

²⁴ The same Greek (root) word is used; hence Mark is (presumably) being deliberate here!

²⁵ So says, Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, WJK, (2006),78.

²⁶ They reveal aspects of this title, "Son of Man," such as, Jesus authority "on earth," Christ's sufferings, and eschatological judge. At a minimalistic level, the phrase can mean mortal, or human being. Yet, in light of Dan 7:14, it is a *theocentric* title. Use of this title results in an explosive reaction at Jesus trial, see Mark 14:61-64.

²⁷ Mark 2:10; Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24. (Incidentally, the experts of the Hebrew scriptures here could not fail to make the connection with Dan 7:14, even if they are confused as to how Jesus uses that title/expression.)

²⁸ If wealth was a *sign* of God's *blessing* (see Mark 10:17-31; Matt 19:16-30; Luke 18:18-23), what then does poverty mean? We do *not* make that explicit connection today!

poverty and the likelihood of further sickness. This meant that the religious leaders had a stake in the overall economic game, just as the political leaders had a stake in the religious game. Consequently, *if* Jesus *can* heal sickness and *has* divine authority to forgive as well, *then* he is a threat to the power structures of both the religious and political elite.²⁹ In Mark 3:6, after another Son of Man claim to be “Lord of the Sabbath,” the reaction of the Pharisees is telling. These religious “conservatives” are willing to collaborate with political “liberals” to *kill* Jesus! They understand the implications of Jesus’ claims as challenging the status quo. The gospel of Jesus is “good news” for the oppressed, but not to everybody! We often overlook this political dimension because we pigeon-hole Jesus as purely a *spiritual* man.

This leads me to my third and main point; this story suggests healing and forgiveness are somehow related. Since the Enlightenment, we in the West have tended to separate the “physical” from the “spiritual.” More than that, secular modernism even *denies* the *reality* of the spiritual and only considers the physical as *real*; you and I are “nothing but” atoms and molecules. Post-modernism rejects that claim and embraces things like, mindfulness, wellbeing, spirituality, and is generally more holistic. This is a recognition that we human beings are indeed *more* than simply our constituent chemicals, and Christians and others faith traditions agree! Hear these words from the Psalmist: “Praise the LORD, my soul, and not forget his kind deeds. *He is the one who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases*, who redeems your life from death and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your life with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”³⁰ Notice how forgiveness and healing are placed closely together. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, salvation is *more* than forgiveness, important though that is, it is *holistic* – or “whole-bodied” salvation.

We therefore need to be careful as Christians in projecting the image that forgiveness of sin is really all God is concerned about. Consider the first, major biblical story of salvation, namely, the exodus from Egypt.³¹ When God rescues them from Egypt, through Moses, he is not coming to “forgive sin,” as such, but to *restore life* and well-being through physical deliverance from the oppression of slavery in Egypt. There are socio-economic aspects of salvation in our New Testament story today too. Jesus not *only* bring divine forgiveness; the healing restored the root cause of the man’s physical alienation from his community – and any stigma associated with it.³² In the presence of Jesus, sin and illness *lose their power*; Jesus came to save us from both. In other words, it is not just what Jesus *says* but what he *does*.

²⁹ See also John 11:45-53.

³⁰ Ps 103:2-5. See also 2 Chron 7:14; “healing” and “saving” are linked in Hebrew.

³¹ There are two major Old Testament stories of God’s salvation; the first is the exodus *from* Egypt and the second is the exile *to* Babylon. In the first case, Israel’s suffering occurs because of the sins *of others*, the Egyptians. In the second case, Israel’s suffering occurs because of *their own* sin. God rescues or “saves” in *both* cases.

³² Here Jesus does *not* ask (or address) where the illness comes from or who/what has caused it. It is *not* about *guilt* or an *explanation* for the *origin* of disease and suffering! While it is true that some individual actions have natural (negative) consequences for a person’s *own* health, we must also remember that illness, etc., are often a result of sins committed *against* a person, community, or nation. We need to be *very* careful *not* the “blame the victim” here! Note too that the sick person does not need to be forgiven to receive healing, there is no *temporal* link implied here.

In conclusion, the God of the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus are *both* concerned with the salvation of our whole being *and* for the world of which we are apart. This is true both in the present life *and* in the life to come. God is not only concerned about our relationship with him that has been fractured and requires forgiveness and reconciliation, but he is also concerned about creation's suffering and its complete restoration. God's saving work in the world is not only deliverance *from* sin but also deliverance from sin's *effects*.³³ Salvation is both a whole-of-body salvation and a communal salvation. It is therefore right that we come to God in *faith* and in *prayer*, seeking *both* forgiveness and healing. But note this: God also works *through* the medical profession; failing to use those opportunities available to us is *not* a sign of faith but a *rejection* of one God's main means of healing today.

Here is my final observation: This popular Sunday-School story is clearly far from simple. The above conclusion is problematic for ministers, like me, because while I passionately believe all this is true, yet I don't see the healing and wholeness I want or expect to see as a result of this holistic picture. I have witnessed glimpses of this from time to time, enough to convince me of its truth. Yet I, like you and the whole of Church History, long for more. Jesus – the Son of Man - certainly was special – he is *unique* - yet he has commissioned *us all* to do together what he began, empowered by his Spirit. Last week I spoke about *partnering with God*.³⁴ Living out our calling in partnership with God, and with each other, and with other groups who share this vision, is, I believe, the only way forward for our wellbeing and that of our larger society.³⁵ The more we do that, I believe we will see an increase in wholeness, both physical and spiritual, in the life of our community here and beyond. We therefore have to ask ourselves, *where* are we in this partnership and *how* are we working to enhance it? Recall what I said earlier, it is not just what Jesus *says* but what he *does*. We can be asked the same question: What is that *we are saying* and what is that *we are doing*? Both are vitally important. Food for thought! Amen.

³³ This suggests there *is* a link between sin and suffering (cf. Adam and Eve and the "curse.") This is too complex an issue to address here! However, in Hebrew thinking, there *is* a nexus of subtle (and not so subtle) effects of sin with creation. Regardless, God's salvation addresses *both* sin *and* its effects.

³⁴ See: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Partnering-with-God.pdf> .

³⁵ See, for example, John 14:12-14 – yet be careful in understanding and "applying" these verses.