

Mark 2:1 When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" ¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹ "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." ¹² And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Jesus the Liberator

Mark 2:1-12

If we are going to study the life of Jesus, not just his birth and death, but the time he spends in this world, we have to look at the way he begins his ministry, the types of people he calls to be his disciples; we definitely have to look at his teaching, the message he carries to the world, and we have to look at his miracles. So, let's put ourselves into this scene in the most extreme way possible. Let's look through the eyes of the man on the mat.

You are paralyzed. Your legs do not work. In a day before wheelchairs, you can only move by being carried. Imagine the sense of constriction, restriction, and dis-ability in being completely dependent on others to pick you up and carry you everywhere you must go. The good thing is, you have people who care enough to help you. Family and friends work together to get you out of bed in the morning, get you out of the house, and outside. You do not only feel like a burden, you literally are a burden others must carry. But they are happy to do so.

Your friends come to you one day to tell you that Jesus is back in town. You know who Jesus is; you live in the town from which he began his ministry, Capernaum. He hasn't been around much, but they say, he is here, now. You feel your hopes rise as they lift your body onto your makeshift bed and carry you to the house where Jesus is staying.

Obstacles. There are always obstacles when you are disabled, and your friends encounter yet another one when they get to the house. They cannot get in. The people are packed so tightly into that small house there simply isn't room for four men and a fifth man on a mat. Your hopes sink, but then they rise again because your friends believe this Jesus can heal you. They believe it so strongly that they pick you up, and, grunting and panting, they lift you up onto the roof, begin to dig through the dried mud until there is a hole large enough for you to fit through. Finding enough rope, they begin to lower you into the room below. Imagine the feeling of wondering if they're going to drop you; looking down at the faces of some very surprised people, including Jesus! When you finally are resting on the floor, you look up at Jesus. He looks up at your friends, looks down at you; you think, this is it. This is the moment. He's going to heal you. He looks lovingly at you and says,

"Son, your sins are forgiven."

Sins are forgiven! Is this not the strangest thing he could say? Does he think your friends lowered you through the roof because you are a terrible sinner? Surely Jesus doesn't think forgiving your sins will cause you to get up and walk, as though your legs have been crippled by guilt. Why does Jesus tell this man lying on the mat in front of him, unable to stand or walk, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

That's what the scribes in the house want to know, too, but for a different reason. Scribes are lawyers, experts in the law, and, in their legalistic belief system, it would not be surprising to think that a crippled man is suffering as a result of his sins. They're not surprised that the topic of sin is introduced, they're surprised that Jesus would have the gall to say something no human has the right to say; to speak on behalf of God; to usurp the authority of God and forgive the sins of another person.

"This is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

This is NOT how you saw this happening. Instead of being healed, you are witnessing a confrontation between Jesus and the lawyers of the Jewish faith! "Blasphemy," they're calling it. People get killed for the crime of blasphemy. Are they going to arrest him before he even gets a chance to try to heal you?

But Jesus is nonplussed.

"Which is easier," Jesus responds, "to say to this man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?"

But, before anyone has a chance to debate that question, Jesus continues, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," then he turns to you and says, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." There is a collective gasp in the room as your legs begin to move. Your knees bend, your ankles flex, and, in a state of shock, you roll off your mat and slowly stand up, as amazed as anyone else in the room. You stare wide-eyed at Jesus, then look around at the crowd, and, without saying a word, you bend down, pick up the mat and stumble out of the house, free for the first time in your life.

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What is the meaning of this miraculous event? On Wednesday night, we talked about miracles being signs. The miracle itself is not the center of attention, as mind-boggling as it might be. It is a sign that, like all signs, are only important because of the thing they point to. A sign this incredible and amazing

must be pointing to something truly life-changing. And it does. It points to the truth that this man Jesus of Nazareth not only has the power to heal, for there were others with the power to heal; he has two even greater powers: compassion and forgiveness.

Compassion – literally means to suffer with. Jesus sees this man suffering, he sees the man's friends who also have such compassion as to go to these great lengths to bring the man to him; he heals him. Throughout the gospel accounts to Jesus' life, Jesus' healing is always a result of his compassion. Just before this story, Mark tells of a man with leprosy who comes to Jesus *begging* him to make him clean. Jesus is moved to such a depth of compassion that the word Mark uses to describe Jesus' emotion is not just pity or compassion, but *anger* at the suffering this man is having to endure. With a word, Jesus speaks wholeness into the leper's body.

Jesus' power to heal is not governed by his desire to show people what a great man he is. This isn't a show; it's not entertainment; it isn't to draw attention to himself. Jesus heals because he loves. He has the power to heal, and he uses that power because he cares; he feels; his heart is filled with compassion for those who suffer.

Compassion. And the power to forgive sins. The scribes have it right, "Only God has the authority to forgive sins." The reason is that it is only against God that we sin. We wrong others, hurt others, betray others, but we sin against God. Sin is that act of disobedience against the law or the will of God that puts us into a state of separation from God. You sin against God, and no one but God can forgive your sin. So no one but God can say to you, "Your sins are forgiven." I don't mean like a minister assuring you that God has forgiven your sins; I mean like someone actually forgiving your sins.

It is a simple assertion with world-changing implications. God has become a man. Jesus is God, with all of the power and authority of God. He has authority over the powers of evil that take over our bodies and cause them to be paralyzed or have illness so that he can say the word and that illness is corrected, and we are made whole; we are freed of that illness; but he also has the authority, not to speak on God's behalf, but to remove the sin from us that only God can forgive.

This much is clear: Jesus has come to liberate; to free people from every kind of bondage, including their bondage to sin, and he has done it because of his compassion.

There is another story that must be told to fully illustrate Jesus' desire and power to liberate. It is found in Mark 5 and it is the heart-rending story of a man who is out of his mind. He lives among the tombs in a graveyard. They've tried to control him by chaining his hands and feet, but he breaks the chains. They can't control him. He sits naked in the graveyard, cutting himself with sharp rocks, howling and screaming, out of his mind with internal tortures no one can imagine.

Jesus comes to him and the man knows who Jesus is. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you by God, do not torment me."

Calmly, Jesus asks, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion; for we are many."

Jesus commands the evil spirits within this man to leave him. Suddenly, an entire herd of pigs in a nearby field begin screaming and the entire herd runs over the edge of a cliff and into the water below.

When we turn and look again at the man named Legion, we see him sitting still, quiet, clothed, and in his right mind. As Jesus turns to leave, the man asks Jesus if he can go with him. Jesus says, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

The man is free. Jesus, out of his compassion, wants to free us all of the memories, the worries, the pains, the fears, the sins that hold us captive. He wants to do so because he sees the way we suffer, and in his compassion, he suffers with us.

During this season of Lent, this time of heart-searching, I offer this suggestion: spend some time this week considering the ways you are in bondage to: Anxiety...Idolatry...Bitterness...Broken relationships...Fear...Depression...Guilt...Greed...As well as illness of body and mind...

...and the ways your bondage holds others in bondage, too. What keeps you from being fully present and available to the people around you?

As we consider the ways we live in bondage, in captivity, may we also consider who Jesus is, and what he has done. He is the Son of God, and he has set us free.