We are still in January, and I think a new year always brings with it expectations for what might be possible. This week was also the second inauguration of our President and, regardless of how you feel about it, a new term always carries expectations of one kind or another—especially when times are hard and the challenges persist.

Understand, there were great expectations around the time that Jesus lived. The Jewish people were living under a cruel and oppressive Roman empire, so many hoped that God would send his Messiah, the Anointed One. You recall that last week we heard Jesus reading from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And, then, declared, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus is announcing that he is that Messiah. The kingdom of God has come near, and this is what it looks like.

Our passage for today is about one of many healings that Jesus performed. Notice how the passage begins by describing Jesus. “One day while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby [they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem]; and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.” This passage describes the living out of what Jesus proclaimed. The Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus as the Messiah, just as the prophets proclaimed. Word is getting out about Jesus, so many gather, undoubtedly filled with expectations to hear authoritative teaching and power manifested in healing.

Sandwiched between these descriptions of Jesus, we see that the Pharisees are introduced for the first time in the Gospel of Luke. The Pharisees were not priests, but they were a group concerned with the teaching, interpretation and observance of the law. These particular Pharisees were not only from the surrounding area in the region of Galilee but from the region of Judea and Jerusalem—a distance of about 70 miles. It’s possible that they—like so many others—wanted to see for themselves...
Jesus welcomes this interruption, and what he sees is remarkable faith.

this person they were hearing about. But it’s also very probable that they had heard reports and were here to check Jesus out, because he was claiming a special personal authority derived from the Spirit to violate the law by healing on the Sabbath or touching an unclean person.

So, in this opening sentence, we have Jesus with the power of the Lord on him to teach and miraculously heal, juxtaposed against the established religious system that wants to do things by the rules. You might say that there is a dramatic tension at play here. We’ll come back to the Pharisees in a moment.

Then, there is a paralyzed man who is brought to Jesus. It’s interesting that we know virtually nothing about this man except that he is paralyzed. Keep in mind, this was a day and age where there was no medical world that offered any hope for healing or a social structure to provide help for the disabled, so he would have been helpless in many ways. In this context, great expectations were placed on people claiming to have healing power. We don’t know if the paralyzed man asked for this. We don’t know what he believed or even knew about Jesus.

What we know for sure is that this paralyzed man had some good friends. Luke doesn’t say how many friends there are, but the account in the Gospel of Mark says there were four friends. These four unnamed men were so concerned for the condition of their friend that they went out of their way to get help for him. They had love, compassion, mercy, faith, perseverance and a willingness to do for their friend what he could not do for himself by literally carrying him to Jesus. You can see in the picture the crowd of people blocking the door, but the friends didn’t let that obstacle stop them. They creatively and imaginatively figured out how to get the man to Jesus by lowering him through the roof.

Now, think about what it would have been like to have been in this small house listening to Jesus’ powerful teaching, and all of a sudden, there is quite a ruckus as the roof opens up and a man on a mat is lowered into the room. Think about how you feel when there is a disturbance at a lecture, or concert, or a movie that you are attending. Undoubtedly, some people would have been annoyed by the interruption, while others might have felt embarrassment or even shame.

But these guys don’t care about that; they are willing to do whatever it takes because they care about their friend, and they’re convinced Jesus is the one who can help him.

Jesus welcomes this interruption, and what he sees is remarkable faith. This is the first reference to faith in the Gospel of Luke, but it is not the faith of the paralyzed man in need. It’s the faith of these
But what is clear is that Jesus came to free us from all that cripples, binds and enslaves.

friends, who believed in Jesus and his power and authority to do for their friend what only he could do. Because of their faith, Jesus does a miracle.

Now, this is where the story takes a remarkable turn, giving a big surprise to all those present and to us, the readers. Just when we expect him to say, “Get up and walk” or “Be healed,” we read instead, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

Some background information is helpful here. Understand that in Jesus’ day it was a common suspicion that people encountered calamities of all kinds because of their sinfulness. This passage is actually scandalous, because Jesus responded to the man’s need and pronounced his sin forgiven, demonstrating God’s unconditional love, mercy and grace. Jesus delivers him, rescues him, saves him, by removing the barriers of sin and brokenness that were keeping him from experiencing shalom—peace, wellness and wholeness.

Thankfully, today, we don’t generally attach to illness the implication of sin, but there are still conditions that are often considered socially unacceptable—mental illness being among them. You recall that last week Pete said that, in the Gospel of Luke, we see that Jesus is on the side of the poor—certainly the economically impoverished but also those who are socially, physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually poor and often marginalized. You’ve heard it said that God helps those who help themselves. That’s not in the Bible, friends, and it’s a lie. God helps those who are willing to receive His help. Those who are vulnerable are often those most open and receptive to the grace of God.

What is Jesus up to in this passage? In this passage, we see that faith, healing and forgiveness are closely related. Jesus uses his power to heal, to confirm his authority, to forgive sin. There is a lot that is left unsaid in this passage. There is some mystery here. But what is clear is that Jesus came to free us from all that cripples, binds and enslaves.

This is the meaning of salvation. Salvation is not believing, doing or possessing the right things so you can get your ticket to ride, so to speak, and go to heaven when you die. Jesus comes to bring salvation, shalom or wholeness. He comes to restore to us the life he created and redeemed us to have. Jesus is the living Lord of the universe. He alone can save us from our sin and heal us from our brokenness of all kinds, and restores to us to the life he intended us to have. The abundant and eternal life is in knowing God through Jesus Christ—the Anointed One, the Messiah, the one on whom the Spirit rests. This abundant and eternal life is found only in Jesus. And only Jesus can
The religious leaders were unable to recognize the presence and work of God in their midst, and thus missed the opportunity to be a part of what God was doing.

remove the barriers that keep us from him. In other words, by grace, Jesus accomplishes for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves.

This blows everyone’s mind, because only God can make the claims that Jesus is making. Only God can forgive sin. And Jesus says, "That’s right.” That’s right. “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins [he said to the one who was paralyzed] I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.’ Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.” In his teaching, healing, and now his authority to forgive sin, Jesus is exceeding expectations. So, how do people respond to Jesus’ teaching and authority?

As you look at this painting depicting the healed man interacting with Jesus and glorifying God, you can also see the religious authorities standing off to the side observing, evaluating and judging all that Jesus is saying and doing. They are whispering that he is committing blasphemy, which technically could be anything that belittled or denied God’s glory.

Do you see the irony running through this whole passage? At the end of the passage, we see that Jesus has, in fact, brought all those present to glorify God. The real blasphemy or belittling of God is found in those who resisted Jesus’ ministry to the afflicted, bound and oppressed. As in many of the healing stories of Jesus, we are left to wonder who is really crippled, who is really blind, who is really captive.

The religious leaders were unable to recognize the presence and work of God in their midst, and thus missed the opportunity to be a part of what God was doing. In fact, the religious leaders were most guilty of thwarting and eventually dismissing the work of God taking place among them. They already have their religious system with its predictable rules and expectations that allows them to remain safe and in control. Their religious system also afforded them an easy, straight-forward way of evaluating themselves and others—by the externals of laws and rituals, religious beliefs and loyalty to the powers that be.

Just as Jesus will not allow this crippled man to be bound any longer, Jesus does not want to be bound by the limited sight and paralyzing impact of a religious system that is so tightly managed and controlled that it can’t recognize God when He is standing right in front of them.

The Pharisees had a problem. They knew what they knew, but they didn’t know what they didn’t know. You might say they had a problem with awareness. I have told you before that I am a recovering Pharisee, so I always find these texts uncomfortable,
challenging and convicting. But lack of awareness is not just a Pharisaical problem, it is a human problem. So, right now I want to take a moment to test your awareness. [awareness test video]

How many of you got the right answer to the number of passes? How many of you saw the moonwalking bear? I didn’t the first time I saw this. As I said, lack of awareness is a human problem, as our attention is often focused on one thing and sometimes even the wrong things. I like this test, because it illustrates how easy it is to miss the most interesting or even significant thing going on. Lack of awareness keeps God in a domesticated box of our own making. We have such a great God, such a great Savior, who is always exceeding our expectations if we have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts ready to recognize his presence and power. He is able “to do immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). So, I want to ask you some questions of my own by giving another kind of awareness test?

First question: Are you aware of Christ’s presence with you through the power of the Holy Spirit? I’ve shared this quote from Richard Rohr many times in the last few months because it is an important thing that I’m working on right now. “We cannot attain the presence of God. We're already totally in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness.”

It takes time, intention and practice to cultivate awareness to recognize and experience God with us. How do we do this? By spending time with God, listening to Him speaking to us through His word and engaging in conversation with Him in prayer. It takes time in silence and solitude to quiet the external, deforming voices as well as the inner compulsions so we can learn to hear the still, small voice of the Spirit. Some of you are probably thinking you don’t have time. But you do. You have the same amount of time that each of us has. And you have time for what is important to you. And if cultivating awareness of God’s presence is important, you can start with ten or fifteen minutes a day or even several times a week, and you can start with following the daily devotions on Luke.

Second question: Are you aware of your need for healing and transformation? This story is not just about a physically paralyzed man. It’s about a man who needs an encounter with the living God. It’s important that we find our place in this story. We are all crippled, blind, or captive in some way or another. Brokenness comes in many forms—physical, emotional, relational and spiritual.

Our culture conditions us to be self-reliant. We are conditioned to show our best pretend
self to God and others, and act as if we are better, stronger, or more competent than we really are. But this pretend self is the greatest barrier to healing and transformation. It is in the places of vulnerability that we are open to receive and experience Jesus’ transforming love and grace and power.

But it’s not just brokenness; it’s our sinfulness that needs to be transformed. I thought again of the words of Robert Mulholland Jr.: “Are you sorry for things you have done or for being the kind of person who does such things?” God doesn’t want to just change our behavior; He really wants to make us holy people. We are to become responsible or response-able people—people able to respond in the moment with Christ-likeness to do what needs to be done with love, gentleness and kindness. The journey of life and faith is one of ongoing healing and transformation at deeper and deeper places of our hearts, souls and minds. Awareness to our need for healing and transformation is the first step.

Third question: Are you aware of your need for relationships? The relationship of these friends may not be the main gist of this story, but I have to say, these friends speak to me. This journey of life and faith is not an independent, individualistic calling. We really are created for relationships—with God and with others. We really do need the love and support of other people in our lives. We are to share the journey and do life together with others.

Of course, our primary commitment is to family—children, parents, siblings. But we also need to cultivate deep spiritual friendships to support and sustain us through the ups and downs of our lives. The kind of community God wants for us will only happen as people bring their true selves and not their pretend selves to the group. This kind of community, too, takes intentionality and time.

That’s why we encourage people to become part of a group. The aim is not to get people into a group but to provide an environment where people can be known, loved, served and cared for. Coming to worship once a week is an inspiring and important practice for our life of faith together, but it will not cultivate the kind of relationships we need to support and sustain us on the journey.

But some people need additional relationships to support them in their journey, and every week, in the bulletin, we list not only growth groups but also a variety of caring relationships to support those feeling paralyzed in some way so they can find the support they need.

Last question: Are you aware of the needs of others around you and willing to be God’s instruments in the world? None of us can meet all
It’s one way of saying who we are called to be and how we are to live.

the needs of everyone around us, but we can do something. And we can begin by being aware of the needs around us and being convinced that Jesus can meet human needs. Every one of us can pray for others, and when we do, we are bringing them to Jesus, asking him to do in and through and for them what only he can do. When we witness to those who don’t know Christ, we are introducing people to Jesus, who alone can save them. When we love, care for, or serve someone, we are the presence of Christ to them—his body on earth.

This past week, I had the opportunity to experience this passage in a new ministry that I’m involved with starting here at VPC, called Renewing Prayer. A group of us have been going through training this last year so that we can be like the friends in this passage helping people experience a transforming encounter with Christ. This week, I brought to the group a need for healing, and I had the privilege of friends gathering around me to pray for me. And I experienced Jesus speak life-changing words of truth to my heart, and soul mind. Later, I joined others as we gathered around another person.

This is one of many ministries at VPC that seek to bring people to Jesus. We believe God is alive and well and still wants to speak life-giving words to us. We believe that Jesus is the one who can do in and through and for us what only God can do. So I want to ask you, which question resonates with you? I hope you will identify before you leave today your next step to cultivate awareness in your life.

I long for our church to more and more be one that others describe as a community upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests. That can happen as each of us seeks Christ for our own ongoing healing and transformation. It can happen as each of us seeks to live in relationship with others by cultivating community as we share the love of God, the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit. It can happen as each of us discerns our calling and brings our best self with our passions, gifts and abilities to participate in God’s work as instruments of His love and grace bringing healing, wholeness, shalom to a world living in darkness.

Does this sound familiar? It should. We are becoming like Christ together for the world. This isn’t just a nice slogan or mission statement. It’s one way of saying who we are called to be and how we are to live. May it be so!