

Your End of the Stretcher  
Mark 2:1-11  
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Over the past several weeks, we've studying passages in the Bible that prophesied the coming Messiah and the New Covenant. Two weeks ago, we looked at a passage in Luke as Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of those prophecies at the synagogue in Nazareth; last week, we eavesdropped on a nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in the Gospel of John: you must be born-again, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. Today, we're going to look at another passage from early in Jesus' ministry as he claims one of the prerogatives of God- this time, from the Gospel of Mark, chapter two.

**Read Mark 2:1-11**

A lot of enthusiasm greeted Jesus; as the end of chapter one tells us, he was so popular, he "could no longer enter a town openly..." After his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus had been bold in proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand. He welcomed disciples to follow him, and began to heal the sick and drive out evil spirits. When he came to Capernaum, he likely stayed at the home of new disciple Peter, who lived in Capernaum. That's where we pick up the scripture today; a creative way to do Bible study is to put yourself into the story, and this story has a lot of people in it... let's join them!

With all that's happened in the first chapter, word had begun to spread from one person to another: "Who is this Jesus?" Was he just another traveling rabbi, or some sort

of miracle worker? Was he a magical healer? Or is he something more? Now he's come to Capernaum, and that's close enough for you sail your fishing boat over, or walk to. Are you one of the curious, one of those who crowded into the house to hear what he had to say? Who is the guy, anyway- and will it make any difference?

That's what the rabbis wanted to know, too. Those religious leaders sitting there in the front row to evaluate Jesus were wondering about that. They were the keepers of the status quo, and the overseers of all that was traditional. They were there to judge Jesus' orthodoxy, and Jesus knew it.

As I talk with folks, and read a wide variety of commentary, I find that there are a lot of people out there who simply don't like the church much- any church. Statistics released this past week show another large drop in church involvement across virtually all denominations; Presbyterians are down to half the size we were 25 years ago. There are many reasons for that, yet I sense a lot of folks are turning away from traditional church because it's just too... traditional. Leaders at Crestview are reflecting on what that might mean here; so should us all.

What I sense- and what gives me great hope- is that while a lot of people may not like the church all that much... they really love Jesus. What he stands for resonates with folks, and we know that he challenges us to become better people from the inside out. Loving your neighbor, caring for the needy, he's someone who cares about us, and he's not afraid to challenge the status quo, if need be. There's a lot about Jesus to like, and maybe that's why there was such a large crowd to listen to what he had to say. Are you in that crowd, or are you inside, already in your customary spot?

There's someone nearby with a very personal interest in Jesus- and that's a man Mark identifies as a paralytic. Word had gotten to him that Jesus was a healer, and he hoped that if he could just get to Jesus that he might get healed. Mark doesn't say much about him, beyond the fact that he couldn't walk... just that there was something wrong, and he needed help.... Like all the others who went to Jesus, he hoped that Jesus was someone who could make a difference in his life.

Is that you? Do you feel sometimes paralyzed with guilt, or grief, or depression, or anxiety? Are you struggling with a burden that leaves you feeling as if you've become incapacitated in some way? Do you remember hearing about Jesus speaking over in Nazareth about God's Messiah preaching good news to the poor, providing recovery of sight to the blind, setting free the prisoner and freeing the oppressed... and that you don't have to be one of God's chosen ones? Maybe he came to help you- for God so loved the world, you know.... No matter how long you've been struggling... maybe Jesus is someone you need to draw closer to- any way you can.

If you're unsure... risk asking someone for help. Consider what those friends did for that paralyzed man. They likely had to construct a stretcher to get him over to the house; not too many gurneys with wheels around those days. Have you carried someone on a stretcher very far... very awkward and hard to maneuver, and it feels like your arms are going to fall off. And then- to get that man up to the roof... imagine hoisting that all that dead weight... just ropes, no pulleys; no freight elevators around, either. Then, to digging through the sticks and plaster- a hole big enough to lower a six-by-three foot stretcher. What a surprise that must have been to be the owner of the house when all that debris came showering down on him! Are you that guy, or the woman of the house?

We don't know if Jesus was startled or not, but verse five tells us that he said to them... to the four or five of them who did all the carrying, hoisting and lowering, along with that paralytic along for what must have been a bumpy ride... "When Jesus saw their faith..." Whose faith? The faith of the friends... that's why we do Christianity in groups. There are those times when we're not able to get there on our own, and there are others around us to support us... carry us... get us there. "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'"

That's when the visiting rabbis freaked out... talk about doing something untraditional... only God can forgive sins... what is Jesus saying?! Blasphemer! Jesus knew what they were thinking, turned to them, and in a few verses- pointed out that it was easier to heal a paralytic than it was to forgive sins... actually both were quite hard, yet equally easy to God. That's when he turned to the man on the stretcher and said to him, "I tell you, so that you will know that the Son of Man has the power to forgive sins- get up, take up your mat, and go home." And that's exactly what that guy did....

Let me ask you- how many miracles took place that day? Clearly, there was a healing miracle, and there was the miracle of forgiveness. But, what about the miracle of faith? That paralytic man- motionless for we don't know how long- had to choose to gather his twitching muscles together and then stand up... and then decide to no longer let others carry him around, cook and bring him food, take care of all his personal needs. He had to decide that what Jesus said was something he could act on and live with- and he did. Miracle #3- a miracle of faith!

I wonder if any other miracles took place that day... were there others in that crowd who saw and heard the whole thing, and chose to believe that maybe Jesus was

who he said he was... the Messiah, the Son of God. It says that some were amazed, and praised God... but I suspect not all of them. Some were just pew sitters content to watch the whole thing unfold... spectators and not participants. Of course, there were those sour-faced rabbis with clenched jaws, looking like they had just eaten a bucket of lemons.

How about you? If you were in this biblical event, would you be the paralytic hoping for help... or standing by in the crowd watching... or the homeowner calling your insurance company to complain about your damaged roof... too worried about your stuff to notice all the God-sightings popping all around you?

I wonder about those hardworking, hopeful guys who carried the paralytic up to the roof and lowered him down to Jesus... can you imagine how they felt as they saw their friend get up, and walk out! High-fives all around, with a "Halleluiah!" and a "Praise God!" thrown in for good measure. Those four guys- when Jesus saw their faith- a miracle took place as hope was fulfilled.

Whose stretcher can you carry? You may not be able to literally lift a stretcher, but you can sure pray for someone. You can make a phone call. You can serve coffee, go visit someone you've not seen for awhile. Which end of the stretcher can you pick up, and who can you carry into the presence of the Son of Man?

There's a group of students and adults here who head out tomorrow morning, going to Laos to do some stretcher-carrying... reaching out to some street children to spiritually carry them into the presence of Jesus. Why not pick up the other end of the stretcher, and carry them in prayer while they're gone... carry them all the way to Jesus. As disciples- that's the least we can do....!