

Salvation by Surprise
Mark 2:1-12

I am enormously grateful for the time you gave me for renewal leave this summer. It changed me in ways I had not even imagined before. I am glad to be with you again.

My time away began with eight days of silent retreat at a Jesuit retreat center in Colorado. Every long, silent day was broken by just one hour with a spiritual director, someone who guided me each day into a focus on imagining myself actually *in* an encounter with Jesus, through one of the stories in the Gospels. 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 hours on just that?" And as I came back in the first day or two 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 was asking 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.

Some of you have been in Bible Study classes with me over the past four years, so you know that I take the Bible seriously. I think the Bible always has something to say to us *now* about how God is present in the world. But this was different. For me it was a new way of taking in those words that we always hope will have some holy meaning, but that we often come away from disappointed. And one of the things I learned is that when I just *sat* with those words—sometimes for hours, sometimes 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. Can't relate, but you know the story.

I want to tell you what I heard when I let myself linger over that story a little longer. Three things that I'd never noticed before, three things that have helped me make sense of my own life in the last month.

First, I realized 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 improvement. It's transformation, which always requires our willingness not to move *above* the low spots in our lives, but to go *through* them. Because *our* story—Jesus' story—is that no matter how far down our lives take us—even to death, we will find new life again and again—in the very middle 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 moving away from God, not toward God.

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

Finally, I noticed the messiness of this story. You know, removing a piece of the roof to drop a hospital bed into a crowded house isn't supposed to sound normal to us, any more than it did to people in Jesus' time. 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 recently 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 Jesus refused to let his healing work be limited by their expectations, what they were prepared for. And that's what happened in this story. Jesus' first words to the paralytic weren't "Stand up and walk," but "Your sins are forgiven." When he said those words, 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 is not what I came in here for." It's embarrassing enough to admit you can't walk. Being "outed" as someone who has sins that need forgiving is an entirely different matter.

Maybe that's the difference between healing and "getting treatment". Maybe when you're willing to 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 it will happen.

It took my time away this summer, the release from all those things I usually do to give myself a sense of identity and importance, to open me up that much. And when I did, I found that there were more parts of me that needed healing than the ones I had presented for attention. I started off with my own ideas about

what parts of my life were touchable, and which ones were outside of God's job description. Like the man in this story, I was surprised to find God's eyes, and then finally my own, on some of those places that I thought were off-limits, the "given's" in my life. It wasn't until just the last few weeks that the scale of the change God is inviting me to make have become clear.

Actually, even saying it that way suggests more certainty than I have at this moment. But what I know is this: that I am hearing, quite clearly right now, that I am being called, in the next chapter of my life, to leave some of my familiar places, including this ministry. And so at the end of this month, I will turn over pastoral leadership of this church to someone new, someone our Bishop will send here as your new pastor; and I will move to Berkeley, to become Vice President at Pacific School of Religion.

I'm sure I can't see, right now, all of the reasons that God is calling me to do this. Undoubtedly you can't either. Like so many moments in our lives, this is one where I expect we will see God more by looking back at this moment than what is clear now. I do know that for the next few years, I need to attend to my personal life with greater care than I have mostly done while I have been a pastor. I'm moving to work that is still meaningful and about building the kingdom of God, but work that also has boundaries on it, sturdier limits on the time it asks of me, and its emotional demands. I expect that my work days will hold far fewer of those moments of life-changing inspiration that I've been privileged to be a part of in the four years I have been with you here, but there will be more moments for me to live other parts of my life fully too.

This summer, as I began to sense the nudge to move in this direction, I re-read a book called *Leaving Church*, by Barbara Brown Taylor. She is a preacher whose sermons I have been reading for years, and whom I think of as a mentor. A few years ago, she left the Episcopal church in Georgia where she had been the rector for just four years, and where she had expected to stay for much longer. The book is her memoir of that decision, and I want to read you just a bit of it. These are her words, but they're also my thoughts, and maybe they will tell you a little more of what this decision means for me.

"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 are the losers, while the winners come in last.

For most of my adult life, what I have wanted most to win is nearness to God. This led me to choose a vocation that marked me as God's person both in my eyes and in the eyes of others. I gave myself to the work the best way I knew how, which sometimes exhausted my parishioners as much as it exhausted me. I thought that being faithful meant always trying harder to live a holier life and calling them to do the same. I thought that it meant knowing everything I could about scripture and theology, showing up every time the church doors were open, and never saying no to anyone in need. I thought that it meant ignoring my own needs and those of my family until they went away altogether, leaving me free to serve God without any selfish desires to drag me down.

I thought that being faithful was about becoming someone other than who I was, in other words, and it was not until this project failed that I began to wonder if my human wholeness might be more useful to God than my exhausting goodness."

Becoming Human (p. 218-219)

As hard as it is to leave this church, and you, earlier than I had expected to, long before I would have said it was the right time, this decision is about finding my *human wholeness* in the present circumstances of my life. Seeing that this is the healing I need has come to me completely by surprise, outside all my ideas about what “renewal” this summer was supposed to look like. And I have to tell you that as sad as I am about the leaving part, I also have a great sense of wonder and hope about what God is bringing—to my life and to yours.

Next Sunday, at our all-congregation lunch and meeting after worship, we can talk more about this, and you will hear more about how our Bishop will go about putting a new pastor in place by the first of October. But in the meantime, I want you to know that I plan to spend the whole rest of this month available if you want to talk. Even more, I want you to know that I am praying for you the same gift that I have received: 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.