



WHAT JESUS SAW

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Most of you know that we had our big men's X-Box tournament a couple months ago. You know that Troy Eng went home with the trophy. But you don't know everything that happened that day. What I'm about to tell you does not leave this room. You need to all solemnly swear you will not tell another soul, because it is one of my less than stellar moments and I don't want anyone thinking less of me because of it.

We were playing a driving game, Rally Sport Challenge 2. The Wittenbergs and Peter Johnson had set up enough games for 16 players. Each X Box had four cars going at the same time. The screen was split into four, so you could follow your car as you made your way through the course.

I sat down next to Jim Zellerhoff. I figured I had a better chance racing against him than Cole or Mitchell or anyone under the age of 25. They started the race and I was intensely focused on trying to drive. I'm still pretty sure my controller had something wrong with it.

Anyway, something strange started happening. I noticed that every time I would yell because I ran off the track, Jimmy Z. would yell at exactly the same moment. It was weird. We were even both bobbing and moving around in synch. It was like we were driving exactly the same and making the same mistakes.

About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through, someone looked at our screen and said, how come that car in the upper right isn't moving? Sure enough, one car hadn't moved much past the starting line. And that was my car. It turned out I had been watching Jim's car the whole time, thinking I was driving it. My eyes were on the wrong part of the screen. Hey – it could happen to anybody.

I'm sure that if I HAD been driving the right car, Troy might not be the one polishing that trophy. But that's another story. The point is, I wasn't seeing what I should have.

In the story we're looking at from Mark this morning, we find something similar going on. Most of the people seem to not be looking in the right place. Jesus sees things the rest of them don't. It's part of the surprising Jesus Mark shows us – always doing and saying things that are so original and fresh that those around him are caught completely off guard.

It's hard for us to identify with how shocking Jesus was, because we've heard all the stories all ready. The one we'll look at today is a favorite in kids' Sunday School classes. I feel like I can still picture the old flannel board my teachers would use and the paper Jesus moving around on it. When it's that familiar, we lose the original sense of amazement that hit people when they were around Jesus.

Mark actually tries to help us out in this particular story. He does something unusual in the Greek that isn't preserved in our English translations. He tells it in the present tense – from the perspective of somebody watching events unfold. You can picture Peter sitting down and retelling what he saw that day. I like that. I think it really serves to heighten the sense of suspense and drama. So rather than read you the story out of our normal version, I'm going to try to retell it this morning in the style Mark wrote it. If you want to look it up in your Bible to compare, this story is found in Mark 2:1-12.

It's a few days later, and Jesus comes back to Capernaum. The news spread that he's home, that he's in the house. So a crowd forms, and so many people are gathering that there's no room inside. People are packed around the doors to listen and Jesus is preaching the word to them.

Well these four guys come along, and they're carrying their paralyzed friend on a stretcher. But they can't get close to Jesus, because there are way too many people. What are they going to do? They climb up on the roof and start ripping it off. They dig this hole through the roof and they start lowering their friend down with ropes until he's right in front of Jesus.

Jesus looks at what these guys are doing, and he sees the incredible amount of faith it has taken them to do this. Then he looks at the paralyzed man himself. And he says to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some rabbis are sitting here, and they're thinking to themselves, "Why would he say such a thing? That's downright blasphemous. Nobody but God can forgive sins."

Jesus senses in his spirit exactly what they're thinking, and he says, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to tell a paralyzed person, "Your sins are forgiven," or to tell him, "Get up, roll up your mat and walk?" Okay. If this will be the proof you need that the Son of Man does in fact have authority on earth to forgive sins..."

Then he says to the paralyzed man, "Go ahead and get up. Grab your mat and go home." And guess what? The man stands up, he picks up his mat and walks out – right in front of their faces. Everybody is floored. They're praising God and shaking their heads, saying, "We've never seen anything like this."

That concludes the drama portion of the morning. I hope that hearing it told that way helped a little to reconnect with the wonder of the moment. If I were Peter, I'd have told that story often. That one would never get old.

Our family went and saw the Leonardo Da Vinci exhibit at the Museum of Flight this week. In the exhibit they have all these incredible inventions he designed. He came up with ideas for tanks and robots and flying machines and water pumps. Some of his concepts were centuries ahead of their time, like solar power and a calculator, not to mention his amazing paintings and medical knowledge. When we got done with the tour, I looked at Karin and said, "I feel stupid." She said, "Yeah, me too." We like to believe we're so modern and advanced today, but my mind doesn't begin to think like this man did 500 years ago.

I think that's a small taste of what people felt when they heard Jesus speak and saw him heal people that day. Their minds were blown away by how he thought. It was so new and staggering.

What's surprising in this story is not so much that Jesus has the power to heal a paralyzed man. If he can rise from the dead, a healing like this is not a challenge. But the unexpected twists in this story come from the things Jesus saw that nobody else did. The way he views the world is just as startling today as it was back then.

So what did Jesus see that day?, First,

Jesus saw the power of the word.

Let's look at the actual text:

Mark 2:1-3

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

People came to Jesus that day for any number of reasons: to see a miracle, to find out what the buzz was all about, to watch the rabbis get stumped again. Who knows what the crowd was expecting. He must have felt a tremendous amount of pressure to say something profound, to do something spectacular. But Jesus knew that what people really needed was the word of God. In the first chapter he had told his disciples the reason he came was to preach the good news. That was his mission. He had a singular focus and he wasn't going to be swayed to be somebody else or do something other than what he came to do.

Paul was the same way. No doubt every church he visited had incredible challenges to overcome. There would have been any number of directions to go. But Paul said this:

1 Corinthians 2:2

... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Everything in the world would like to work against us focusing on Christ. Good things substitute for time with God's Word in our lives. Even as somebody who gets paid to spend time reading my Bible, I can tell you it's never easy. There are distractions on every side. Even Paul said it took resolve for him to do that.

But in the end, nothing else has power to really change us. What we think we need from God isn't what we really need. Jesus knew that crowd had all kinds of agendas for him, and what he gave them was the word. When the devil was trying to tempt Jesus to stray from his path, Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy to him and saying:

Matthew 4:4

It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth.

That sounds nice for Jesus to say, but we'd usually rather just have bread. We underestimate the power of God's word to truly make a difference in how we live. Yet over and over again, that's the one thing God uses.

In preparing some devotional materials for the D'Iberville team, I've been spending some time with materials by Charles Spurgeon. He was a preacher back in the late 1800s. At the age of 15 he was really searching for God. He was just tormented by the feeling that God couldn't ever really forgive him for his sins. He decided he was going to try to visit every church in town to try to find peace. But he said that none of the places he visited preached the gospel to him. All these nice big churches, but they had nothing real to offer him.

Then one day he stumbled upon a tiny Methodist Church that was really a joke of a church. There were only about a dozen people there. The pastor hadn't even showed up that week, because of snow. So this guy gets up to fill in. Spurgeon says that when the man read the Bible verse, he couldn't even pronounce all the words right. There was nothing impressive about this church or the speaker.

But Spurgeon was hit right between the eyes with the word of God. The man read from Isaiah:

Isaiah 45:22

Look unto me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is no other.

In a group of only 12, Spurgeon was obviously a visitor. The speaker zeroed in on him and said, "Young man, you look miserable. And you're going to stay that way until you look to Jesus. He's the only answer."

And Spurgeon says it was like clouds parted and a weight lifted. It was the word of God that did that. The church had nothing else to offer. Even today, the church has nothing else to offer. And that's good – because God's word is the only thing with life and power.

We're all part of that crowd around Jesus. We might come to church for any number of reasons – hoping to find friends, hoping to find meaning or help or strength. Other concerns may press in and weigh on us heavily. God's word may feel irrelevant or unwanted. But Jesus saw that it was the one important priority to keep.

You know, we're not going verse by verse through Mark, which gives you a great reason to crack open your Bibles this week. Here's your challenge: Read chapter 1 and see if you can identify the sections we skipped over. You'll get 1000 bonus points next Sunday if you find them. Not really, but you will find that God has life changing power in those words. You will feed your soul. Wrap your mind around something solid that will keep you going for days. Jesus saw the power of the word and made it his mission to stay focused on it.

The second thing Jesus saw in this situation was faith.

Jesus saw faith.

Here's what Mark says about the four men who brought their friend to Jesus:

Mark 2:4-5

Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Houses in Jesus' time were usually of stone construction. They had flat roofs that served as a makeshift patio in warm weather. The roofs were constructed of wooden beams with a thatched material over the top, then mud on top of that. So imagine what was happening below as these men are making a mess of the roof. There's a thumping and scratching. Jesus probably would have needed to start talking louder to be heard.

Then little bits of dirt and grass and wood start showering down on everyone. Suddenly light pours in and this stretcher starts coming down. Now if this were your house, or if you were the one in the middle of giving a talk, what would your reaction have been?

“My house! Who's going to pay for this?” “Who do these guys think they are?” “We were here first – they have no right to cut to the front of the line. They can wait their turn.” “Now I've totally lost my train of thought and nobody's paying attention to what I'm saying.”

But Jesus doesn't criticize them at all. Instead we're told that he looked past all the debris and saw their faith. Not just the faith of the man he healed – the faith of his friends as well. I'd like to make just a few observations about the actions of these four men and what they tell us about faith.

One of the first things that's fascinating to me is the fact that these men didn't say a word. Jesus recognized their faith through their *actions*.

Faith is more than saying we believe something: It's acting on that belief, living like it's true.

First, there was a *persistence* to their faith. When their initial attempts to get to Jesus were blocked, they could have resigned themselves to the fact that there was no way in. But they wouldn't accept that. They didn't stop just because they hit a roadblock. They found a creative alternative approach and they stuck with it.

One year when my cousin Duffy came home from college, he announced to my uncle that he didn't want anything to do with the Apostle Paul any more. A professor had planted the idea in his mind that Paul had turned Jesus' message into something Jesus hadn't intended. Paul, who wrote nearly half the New Testament. Paul who formulated some of the most basic understanding we have about Christianity. It was a major faith crisis for my cousin.

Now my uncle Ken was a pastor, and those are some pretty tough words to hear your son say when you're the preacher. My uncle Ken could have gotten angry and launched into a major defense of Paul. He could have tried to convince my cousin that he was wrong. Instead he just said, "Well, if you can't read Paul's writings, just stick with the gospels."

When you can't get through the front door, go through the roof. That was a bold, creative way to help my cousin get to Jesus when he didn't see how he could anymore. And it totally helped him move past his doubt.

Doubt isn't the end of faith – it's the beginning. We can't crumple or wilt in the face of an obstacle. It's the chance we have to say, "I want to get to the truth. How can I find a way?"

What is standing in your way? What's keeping you from Christ? The word Mark uses for what the men did on the roof is the word for dig. Sometimes it takes digging to get to Christ. It can be messy, hard work. We may have to get creative in our problem solving. But it will be rewarded.

The other quality to the faith these men had was that it was faith *on behalf of someone else*. They were taking these great lengths for their friend who was in such terrible need. They didn't give up on the idea that Jesus could help their friend. It was hard work to carry him all the way into town. It was tricky getting him up those stairs to the roof. It was backbreaking to lower him down through the hole. But they did it because they

believed that Jesus was the only one powerful enough to do something about the situation.

I am so humbled by that example. There are so many friends that I have failed to bring before Jesus. I have forgotten to pray for people, or I've done it a few times and then said, "Well, that's enough of that." It's like I leave them at the back door and figure that's as close as I will get to an answer.

Listen, each one of us is holding up a corner of somebody's mat, and we have the responsibility to pray for each other and bring each other to the feet of Jesus. And each of us is also the man on the mat, desperately needing other people to pray for us and bring us before Jesus. Christ honors our faith on behalf of our brothers and sisters.

One of the biggest surprises of the story comes after the men do this for their friend.

There's no way of knowing from Mark's description as to how long the man has been paralyzed or how he got that way. We don't know if he had been injured or if he had some disease that caused it. All we know is that he is physically incapable of moving.

Imagine this experience from his perspective. He probably had to be strapped onto the stretcher so he wouldn't fall off. Being tipped and jostled as they went up the stairs to the roof. The helpless feeling of being lowered down without seeing where you're going. Then finally, you make it where you've been trying to get all day. Jesus is staring down into your eyes. Can he fix your problem? You're waiting for his verdict, for him to say, "You're cured." But instead he says, "You're forgiven." In Matthew's retelling of the story, he says Jesus words were actually, "Cheer up, son. You're forgiven."

Cheer up? That's it? There is that awful pause between when Jesus has pronounced him forgiven and when he told him to get up and walk. The man had no way of knowing whether or not Jesus would do anything for him physically. Would he hear Jesus' words as having any kind of comfort at all?

The four men in our story had brought their friend to Jesus because they wanted him cured. They looked at him and saw a man in a terrible physical state. Jesus looked at him and knew his spirit was in much worse shape than his body.

Jesus saw the deeper need.

Scripture is very clear to say that we can't blame someone's physical problems on their sin. And Jesus is not saying here that this man is paralyzed because of something he did. But his condition is symbolic of what is going on inside.

Think of what that man's life must have been like. With no sophisticated medical equipment, he was entirely dependent on other people. He couldn't even keep himself clean or feed himself.

Sin paralyzes us. It makes us helpless. We have no control over it. The Bible talks about us becoming slaves to sin. It puts us in a spot where we are unable to move. Jesus looked at that man's soul and knew he was wracked with guilt and that he was powerless to break free of sin. And that was a far more serious issue. Completely invisible to everybody else, but far more important than his physical body.

Joni Eareckson Tada is a famous Christian painter and author who was paralyzed in a diving accident over 35 years ago. She prayed and prayed for a miracle, but she's still sitting on that stretcher, living in that pause between Jesus saying "you're forgiven" and "you're healed". But she has discovered something there. She says, "I had to be healed of my desire to be healed...The greatest good suffering can do for me is increase my capacity for God."

Our capacity for God is what Christ is most concerned about. We make our way to him with all kinds of demands and requests, thinking that those are the things we really need, when really we just need more of him.

What has you paralyzed on the inside? Jesus is speaking those same words to you. "Cheer up. I forgive you." They are bewildering, unexpected words, but they are exactly the right words, spoken to our deepest need.

The words weren't just bewildering to the man on the mat. There were rabbis there who couldn't believe their ears.

Mark 2:6-7

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

I always feel so critical of these guys when they show up in the story, because they never understand Jesus. But then I catch myself and realize that unfortunately their job was essentially the same as my job. If this story were being written today, Mark would probably classify me with the teachers of the law. It makes me stop and think: Would I have reacted any differently to what he was saying?

Jacob Neusner is a rabbi and professor at Bard College who wrote a book called "A Rabbi Talks with Jesus". He says that from what he has read of Jesus' teaching, he would probably been part of the crowd following him around. But he says he would not have been able to swallow everything he heard. He writes, "Jesus takes an important step – in the wrong direction." He can't go along with Jesus claiming the authority to forgive and speak for God the way he does. Neusner says that for him, "At issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all...In the end the master, Jesus, makes a demand that only God makes." So Neusner felt he had to part ways.

That's EXACTLY what those other rabbis were feeling that day. It wasn't a scandal that Jesus preached forgiveness. Who wouldn't want that? It was what his teaching said about himself. He was making a God claim that couldn't be ignored.

For all intents and purposes it looked like a hostile environment for Jesus. But where the rest of us would see trouble,

Jesus saw opportunity

Look how he reacts to what those religious leaders were thinking:

Mark 2:8-12

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? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 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!"

Jesus takes a very negative situation and turns it into an opportunity to bring glory to God. I love it that he doesn't back down from his skeptics. But he doesn't antagonize them either.

Most of us generally go one of two ways when we're feeling attacked or threatened. It's the old fight or flight choice. Either we get defensive and we lash out at our attackers, or we get intimidated and slink away without saying anything. We either seek to protect our pride or hide from possible embarrassment.

Jesus manages to find a third option. He doesn't give way to fear or ego. His primary interest isn't in justifying himself – it's in looking for a way to point these people to God. The rabbis have asked the question: "Who do you think you are?" And Jesus answers their question with a question. "Is it harder to tell somebody who is paralyzed that they're forgiven or they're healed?" Well, it seems the answer would be that it is harder to tell them they're healed, because everyone will know if that's true or not. But nobody can see if you really forgave anything. So then, if Jesus can be taken at his word for doing something visible, it stands to reason he should be taken at his word for doing something invisible. Jesus gives them the closest thing to proof they can get.

Jesus wasn't trying to make the teachers look foolish – he was all about making God the Father look good. And that's exactly what happened. Mark says everyone there praised God for this miracle.

Every day we face a thousand small barriers in life. Sometimes a few big ones that occasionally have names and faces. How do we respond? Do we give way to fear or ego, or do we look for the better question – how to turn the moment into a vehicle for lifting God up? To put it another way, who will we make the situation be about: us, or God?

Jesus experienced the same world as the rest of the people in the room that day, but he saw so much more. Where people looked for a show, Jesus saw God's word was the only thing with power to change anything. Where other people saw four men being a nuisance, Jesus saw a persistent faith. Where people saw physical hardships, Jesus saw the deeper spiritual needs. And where people could only see open hostility, Jesus saw opportunities to generate praise for God.

In the Message translation, Psalm 119 says this:

Psalm 119:18

Open my eyes so I can see what you show me of your miracle-wonders.

Am I looking for power in the right place? Only the word of God himself can speak with the creative force we need to overcome whatever we're facing.

Am I willing to dig to get to Jesus? Faith takes action and persistence.

Who can I bring in front of Jesus? Don't give up praying until Jesus responds.

Where do I go with difficult situations? Do I give way to my fears? Do I defend my pride, or can I recognize the opportunity to make the moment be all about God instead of me?

God give us eyes to see what Jesus sees.