

Mark 2: 1-12

"Paralysis"

**Contextualize:**

From the previous narrative Jesus has been out in a rural area where he was met by a leper, an outcast and one counted among the living dead, who then sought and received from Jesus healing of his affliction.

**Smooth translation:**

Subsequent to his return to Capernaum it was mentioned often in conversation there for a number of days that Jesus was holding forth in a dwelling place. And many came together in this place and their numbers led to over-crowding and the disruption of the usual household protocol. Jesus was helping them to understand what had happened to the leper. As he speaks, a procession approaches the place; a paralytic is being born along by four people strong enough to carry the weight. Impeded from further forward progress because of the crowd, a detour leads to the roof where they create an opening by digging a hole above the spot where Jesus stood and was speaking, and they lower the kرابتون, an apparatus made for the transport of the deceased and mortally ill. When Jesus saw this demonstration of all their faith, he says to the paralytic: " child of the covenant, God forgives your sins!"

Now as one would expect there were scribes in this gathering, sitting and discussing in earnest (as they were trained to do) about what was happening and being said: "Why", they ask, "is this one putting it exactly this way? Is it not tantamount to blasphemy? Who is able to forgive sins? The *shema* says: 'God is one! does it not?" Right away Jesus understood in his spirit the direction of their discussion and he says to them: " and why are you carefully arranging this matter in these terms? Which alternative is a better kind of trouble: to announce to the paralytic 'God forgives your sins' or to command him to rise, lift up his kرابتون now, and walk out of here? And so that you will understand that God chooses to entrust the human creature of his own commissioning with announcing his forgiveness upon mortals – he turns and says to the paralytic as before: "I say to you, rise, take up your kرابتون and go to your home!" And he was raised up by God, and suddenly having lifted up his kرابتون, he walked out before all who were gathered there. And all – no exceptions – were deeply moved at

what had transpired and all gave God the glory saying: "our mortal eyesight never saw like this before!"

## "PARALYZED"

(Intro)

Paralysis comes in all shapes and sizes and it comes to take up residence in peoples lives from many sources and occasions. My wife's brother, Neville, had a stroke recently that left him partially paralyzed on one side and he must now re-learn the use of his limbs on that side and we all hope for his physical recovery. Yet, more common among us all perhaps are those paralyzes of the spirit, of the mind, and of the soul that are just as debilitating as paralyzes of the body; they are just not as readily apparent to the eye, but they are, nevertheless, just as real and as devastating: paralysis, therefore, of one kind or another, stalks us all 'like a roaring lion' – to allude to 1 Peter 5 – 'seeking whom it may devour'.

The paralyzed person in our text is carried by four people who have decided, it would seem, to set aside -for the moment anyway- their own paralyzes to transport the nameless sufferer to an appointed hour of destiny.

(I)

This sufferer, who like the leper in the story just before this one, is without a name, as though the paralysis has taken over everything and left the paralytic with nothing, not even an identity: the name decided upon and given to him or her by loving parents has now been replaced by a label, an entry in a medical dictionary of illnesses among the mortals. ..Oh yes, there it is: on page 666 under "P", just before "pedaphilia", "porneia", "porocardia", and "poverty". Yes, there it is: paralysis > an evil affliction; source: unknown but origin believed to be *diabolos*, *Satana*; symptoms: varied and often in multiple combinations, e.g. Disorientation in matters of purpose, confusion of thought, double-mindedness, speaking with a forked-tongue, or in extreme cases loss of speech entirely, inclination toward idolatry, immodest behavior, greed, guile, and gluttony, etc; only known cure > divine intervention. No loving parent bestows such names of paralysis on the new born; who could bear such an epithet through life? Paralysis, in fact, is bestowed by no parent at all; it comes to a favored, unsuspecting target at night while you sleep and it bears the mark of the beast!

And again, perhaps the paralyzed one of our text, who is a child of God's covenant with Noah and all people and all creatures of earth, bears no name and offers not a single word because he or she is in the last analysis all of

us. Perhaps the author, seeing as through a glass darkly, beholds transparently the faces of us all borne along in this procession, full of pathos and peril, carried at the four corners of our earthly journey by a supporting cast of nameless attendants. Perhaps the author beckons to you and me to fill in the blanks of this gripping intrepid drama of transport by inserting our own names ... even if your own paralyzes prohibit their vocalization and force us, as wandering Aramaean nomads, to name our names only in the silence of our hearts.

Perhaps promising more than one can deliver as regards the longing to become free of paralyzes are two excerpts from the Saturday Post of June 14:

(1) on page 9: speaking on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of the martyred Cuban freedom fighter, Ernesto Guevara, his son, Camilo, has said: "the dream now emerges of a new human being who is constantly renewed, who sacrifices oneself for others, who grows beyond mediocrity, if only for an instant, to become different, better. A dream dormant for many centuries takes shape: free to become an ethical, virtuous, selfless human being", and

(2) on page 14: in an advertisement addressed to the needy: "Why do you suffer? International Dr. A. Mkusa from East-Africa can lead you to a goal of success. He treats sickness which has defeated other doctors. He also solves all problems concerning: chronic misfortunes or bad luck, evil spirits, and restores your luck, sugar problems, love matters, TB, barrenness, power for men, marriage problems as well as stolen properties ... Can also help you recover paralyzed people ... Children less than 5 years treatment is free..." Then follows an address, phone number and business hours on weekdays and Sundays.

(II)

These illustrations along with our text raise for us the question: where is this procession going? To what appointed hour of destiny does it march in silence? These pilgrims in Mark 2 are depicted as faith-marchers. Perhaps they are like Martha in the Lazarus story in John 11:23-27 who believes that God will respond on the side of life on the last day in a distant future. Perhaps they -we- all walk this faith journey to a place crowded to overflowing with others who have been transported there similarly before our own procession arrives? But why the silence among the principals as their journey unfolds? Then, suddenly, it comes into focus when Mark discloses the nature of the pallet, bed, stretcher, cot, gurney (all appear in English translations) supporting the paralytic, lifted by four other paralytics: it is a *krabatton* in Greek, a term of Latin derivation, actually, that has

made its own journey into modern Indo-European languages like English or German with the root "grab" or "grave". "My God", one exclaims, "we are watching here a funeral procession!" The appointed hour of destiny? None other than the grave! And awaiting them -and us? None other than the One who said: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me though he were dead, yet shall he live (Jhn 11). The paralytic is not sick; he or she is sick unto death and the four are as though pallbearers, who one day will succumb to their own paralyzes and will be transported to their own graves!

This twist in the drama changes everything for us as we watch and listen in! And a sensitive, careful reading of all the chapters hereafter reveal a common plight to that of the paralyzed ones here in chapter 2: they have been suffering unto death and have been robbed of the joy of life. But here in 2:1-12 the optical logistics of the narrative are compelling: these nameless, silent paralytics must dig a hole in the earthen cover in order to lower the one on the kرابتون to his final resting place ... and, lo, a new day is dawning as the kرابتون is lowered down. There to welcome the sufferer is the One who meets their faith and declares: "I am the resurrection and the life ... the one who believes in me though dead yet shall he or she live ... shall never die into eternity!" And so the church sings the hymn of Eph 5:14: "Arise then, you who sleep (in death) and arise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you!" What a welcoming party!

(III)

And yet, the party is not solely singing and expressing revelry; it is also one of substantive scrutiny: the representatives of the synagogue whose calling, training, and certification qualify them to scrutinizing all activities administered in the name of God, are there. It is, after all, their job; as scribes they are ordained to this task! For Mark they are there as the follow-up accreditation team sent from the synagogue in the previous story of the paralysis-laden leper. The encounter is a brief yet critical interlude with a profound affect upon the healing in its funerary setting. For Jesus, who echoes the conviction of prophet and psalmist alike, it is God who "forgives all your iniquities and heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:3) ... never one without the other on the road to wholeness and redemption. And so as God's chosen vessel of the hour, Jesus pronounces God's forgiveness that becomes the welcoming embrace to peace with God for all children of the covenant: your sins are forgiven!

Well, actually, the textual tradition here is not quite sure about the most accurate version of this pronouncement: the first two variant readings are equally divided on the present tense (simple or progressive = they are or are

being forgiven) and the perfect tense (they have been and still are forgiven), but the voice in both is passive, i.e. we must add the agency in English to complete the intended form of a divine passive: the sins are or have been forgiven *by God!* The third variant takes the form of a subjunctive mood, which would mean that Jesus was offering a prayer intercession with the pronouncement: may God be merciful and fulfill his promise to you! These are not obscure tidbits of Greek grammar; they deliver us, rather, to the threshold of a great discovery!

Assuming that the leper incident may have involved similar pronouncements, the scribes -those ordained observers with trained eyes and ears- ask some good and necessary questions, which Jesus neither spurns nor rejects! Who is allowed on this earth to pass on to sin-sick mortals the assurance of God's pardoning grace? Whoever does this runs the risk of using God's name in vain -as the third commandment states! Hence, the convention was applied to avoid pronouncing the Hebrew tetragrammaton altogether and thus to read God's name with vowel substitutes, so you would say "Adonai" or "Lord" instead. Jesus has followed the Greek version of this convention by using the divine passive. This implies, with appropriate deferential piety, the agency of God; nevertheless, it is troubling to professional scrutiny and the scribes must ask: "does this not border on blasphemy?" And this trouble will follow Jesus to the trial before the Sanhedrin in chapter 14.

Here in our text the trouble has just begun and the scribes wisely reformulate their question: "who can forgive sins, cleanse lepers, and raise the dead except God who is the one, blessed be his name?" Amen. Yes, they confess the *shema* here, echoing the foundational confession of Judaism from Deut. 10:4, as any pious Jew would have done; and one cannot imagine that Jesus would disagree! To the contrary, he seems here to understand and to appreciate the scribes' own paralytic struggle and even asks them toward what end they are reasoning thus in their hearts. And what he asks them now to ponder represents the center of gravity for our text. Remaining loyal to the use of divine passives to imply God's agency throughout, he asks: what is the better kind of trouble for God: to say to the sin-sick soul, God forgives you or God enjoins you now to rise from death, to lift up your krabaton of mortal demise, and to walk forth to new life?! The English translation of 'which is easier' for the Greek "eukopooteron" completely misses the point: there is nothing 'easy' either way; in fact, the alternatives posed are two sides of a fragile, deadly conundrum for mortals to consider. The 'good trouble' belongs to the gospel kind of trouble or costly nature. Be careful how you hear the question; be careful about trying to answer it! The *trouble* behind the two-edged question leads to the same roadblock to human reasoning: "thus says the Lord, my ways and thoughts are not your ways and thoughts!" The trouble conjures up to our memory the struggle

of Hebrews 9:22 "Under the law almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin!" This is God's struggle, God's trouble. There is another window to this reality in Hebrews 10: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world he said: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, see, God, I have come to do your will. O God, (in the scroll of the book it is written of me) when he said above "you have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law) then he added, 'see I have come to do your will!' Israel knows this prophetic voice about God's trouble to save; the scribes know this; you and I know.

#### (Conclusion)

Trying hard to help the struggling inquisitors, Jesus leads them to a new threshold of vision for pondering this problem: God chooses whomever God wills in the critical hour of need to dispense gracious help and liberating assistance to sufferers without consideration of academic certification. The Son of man, the mortal of God's choosing, is commissioned in the moment to be merciful to the sin-sick paralytics of God's world. This One is God's person of the hour: God forgives, has forgiven, may God forgive your sins and mine now and always ... So, be raised up by God, take up your crutch and go home ... just like the leper! Just like the paralytic!

The conclusion in verse 12 begins with the very same word that is said of Jesus at the empty tomb by the heavenly messengers in Mark 16:6 "he was raised by God". Jesus' tomb and that of this and all paralytics have this in common: God has raised up from the dead and sets us free to live forever toward God and to serve his purposes! Beholding the wonder of it all, astonishment reigns for the gathering in that seemingly final resting place ... They/we can only glorify God and proclaim that for the moment we have seen what we are looking at as we have never seen before! And still lingering in the air, as Mark's gift to us, is the question: how big, how comprehensive, how inclusive is for him and for us *the all* in this conclusion ... is it big enough to include all paralytics of all time – even the scribes and those who condemn and crucify the son of God ... even Jesus who made us to become the non-paralytics of God in him?

May God grant us the strength and courage to answer: Yes!

Amen