

Called to Heal
January 17, 2021
Mark 2:1-12

Mark's gospel was the first of our four to be written, and it is also the shortest. The best guess is that it was written sometime around 62 to 64 A.D., soon after the apostle Simon Peter's death in Rome. The oldest tradition concerning Mark's gospel comes from the early church father Papias, from about 140 A.D., below:

“This also the presbyter used to say: ‘Mark, indeed, who became the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, as far as he remembered them, the things said and done by the Lord, but not however in order.’ For he [Mark] had neither heard the lord nor had been his personal follower, but at a later stage, as I said, he had followed Peter, who used to adapt the teachings to the needs of the moment, but not as though he were drawing up a connected account of the oracles of the Lord: so that mark committed no error in writing certain matters just as he remembered them. For he had only one objective in view, namely to leave out nothing of the things which he had heard, and to include no false statement among them.” (Eusebius, *Church History*, III.39.15)*

By the time Papias wrote this, other gospels were also in circulation, and differences in the order in which things happened would have been noticed. We still notice these differences today. We wish we had a reliable, detailed biography of Jesus which would definitively tell us exactly what happened, when it happened, and with adequate context. But, that was not the purpose of Mark nor any of the other gospel writers. These are evangelical writings. The purpose is that the reader (and those listening to the reader) come to believe the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, as proclaimed and believed by the apostolic Church.

At the time the gospels were written, the generation that knew and saw Jesus, the apostles and disciples who had followed Jesus in Palestine, were passing away. Earlier, there was an expectation of Jesus's imminent return, the “second coming” as we now refer to it. There was no need for writing things down. The earliest written Christian writings that we have, Paul's letters, were not intended to establish a written record. They were to deal with crises in the life of his churches. With the death of Peter and Paul in Rome, the need for the written gospel became apparent. Mark wrote down what he knew from Peter and no doubt other sources. So, in a

sense Mark was writing that Peter's teachings, and the gospel message, might live on despite the passing away of the apostolic generation. His intent was to meet the need for this message in his own day. "Mark, addressed to a martyr church, stresses the heroic ethics demanded by that situation, and above all the heroic example of the Son of God, the church's Lord, as he himself faced death – the victorious Martyr and Lord who was even now present with his amazed and terrified disciples as he had been present with the twelve in Galilee and Jerusalem, in the roaring storm at sea one dark night, and in the lonely, silent garden on the night before he was crucified."* Luke, Matthew, and John each had somewhat different goals. (* Frederick C. Grant, Introduction (to *Mark*), *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, pp. 629-630.)

The *Gospel of Mark* omits the birth stories and may have omitted post-Resurrection material that is now included. Mark's favorite word seems to be "immediately." There is an urgency to his writing. Perhaps he is aware that the shorter he can make his gospel, the more copies can be made and sent out to carry this Good News. There also seems to have been a "secret" version of *Mark* that included additional material, including something like the raising of Lazarus in *John*, but that version is now lost. Later gospel writers were less rushed, and included much more of Jesus's words and teachings, such as the Sermon of the Mount in *Matthew* and the many parables in *Luke*.

Our scripture comes from only the second chapter of *Mark*. Jesus is in the midst of his Galilean ministry. The parallels in *Matthew* and *Luke* are in chapters 9 and 5 of those, respectively, of those books, and are very similar. In Chapter 1 Jesus had already begun his ministry and had healed a man with an "unclean spirit" ("demon" in *Luke*). He had also healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, had cleansed a leper, and "cured many who were sick with various diseases ...". Jesus then seems to have found himself besieged by those seeking him. "... He could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter." (last verse of Chapter 1).

In today's scripture Jesus heals a man who is a paralytic after returning to Capernaum. Jesus is "home," and probably in Simon Peter's house. There is such a crowd that the friends bearing the paralytic man could not get in, so they managed to get up onto the roof and made a hole in it so that they could lower the man down to Jesus. The walls of the house would have been stone (at least on the ground floor). "A village roof in Palestine was made of saplings laid flat, with branches and twigs laid over them, and clay patted down over this and baked in the sun.

Mark may perhaps have thought of a Roman roof (as did Luke in 5:19).” (Quote from Grant op.cit. p669) *Luke* mentions tiles that had to be moved aside. Whichever type of roof was used, getting through it was no small endeavor. Repairing it later would have been no small thing either.

This story is important in Mark for several reasons. First, it is a different kind of healing from those before. It healed a very visible, physical, and debilitating infirmity. Second, the man needing healing was brought by friends; it was their faith that gave him this opportunity to be healed, and it was their faith and their effort that moved Jesus. Third, Jesus equates his healing act to the forgiveness of sin. Fourth, for the first time, opposition to Jesus is reported, from the scribes, the official teachers of the Jewish religion, and the Pharisees. Pharisees were the [mostly] lay devotees and enthusiasts for the scribal interpretation of religion.* Of course, Jesus did indeed heal him. The man got up, took up his pallet, and walked.

It was the conventional Jewish view in that time that illness, especially debilitating conditions such as blindness or paralysis, were the consequences of sin. Jesus seems to have shared that view, at least in this point of his ministry. So, Jesus says, in response to the paralytic man brought to him (in verse 5), “Son, your sins are forgiven.” In answer to the doubters, he tells them that there really is no difference between what he just said, and telling the man to take up his pallet and walk. That is new. In previous healings, Jesus has not (in what we have recorded) explicitly stated that, in his acts of healing, he is forgiving sins. This crosses a line for the scribes and Pharisees. It is understandable that they would perceive that as blasphemous. It would be, if Jesus was not who we know he was. But then, what does healing, especially in this case mean, if not the power to forgive the sins that caused the illness? Yes, we in our day see the issues of sin and healing as completely separate. But Jesus, in his day, sees them as one and the same. Just as “casting out a demon” and “restoring sanity” may perhaps be seen as the same thing in his day, but not in ours.

Jesus connecting sin and illness also occurs, as the lesson writer mentions, in the healing story of John 5: 1-17. But in most stories, Jesus usually heals without mentioning sin as a cause of the illness. In the story of John 9, of Jesus healing a man blind from birth, Jesus says that the blindness was not due to sin, but “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” In John’s gospel, this is very late in Jesus’s earthly ministry. It may be that Jesus had come to a different understanding of the relationship between sin and disease by that point. We just don’t know.

Let's step back from this particular instance, and consider Jesus's ministry of healing more broadly. What was the point? Why did Jesus perform miracles of healing? Why was his ministry not just one of teaching? His teaching was certainly radical enough to attract attention.

I think we can quickly go through the obvious answers. One: this was what men of God such as the prophets Elijah and Elisha had done from of old. Healing demonstrated a connection to the prophets. Two: Jesus was living out a ministry of showing what God's love was like. He had mercy on individuals in distress. He was moved especially by cases such as this, when he saw the paralyzed man's friends going to such lengths for his sake. Three: It was part of the calling of the Messiah. When John's disciples asked if he was indeed the one, Jesus cited his works of healing (Luke 7:22). To those we can now add that, in the understanding of the day, healing demonstrated a forgiveness of sin, and thus God's mercy on those who had the faith to ask for that forgiveness. That forgiveness did not require sacrifice at the temple, or even a rite of baptism, but a humble and contrite heart.

As a contrast, consider a case where Jesus was unable to heal, his visit to Nazareth. We read in Mark 6:5-6, "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief." Whatever Jesus was able to do, it wasn't amazing and flashy like the healing of the paralyzed man or the casting out of a demon. Faith mattered. Why would it? Because if healing was linked to forgiveness of sin, then in the absence of contrition, there can be no forgiveness, and hence no healing. The people of Nazareth were expecting healing and other miracles from Jesus because, as his home town colleagues, they deserved it. They were entitled. If Jesus could heal, they had a right to expect him to use that power for their benefit. He owed that to them. When Jesus told them in the synagogue that it didn't work that way, they were enraged.

That brings us to an important point: that Jesus's mission was not to improve health care in Palestine, or even Galilee. The healing was a sign of His mission as the Messiah, a demonstration that God was in him, and a sign of God's mercy and love. Through healing, Jesus used the circumstances to teach and proclaim, as he did in the case of the paralyzed man in today's scripture. But he couldn't, and didn't, do that for everybody. Just as Elisha healed only Naaman the Syrian of leprosy, when there were many lepers in Israel. We can't get on-demand healing

from Jesus, or God. We can pray for it, even sincerely. But sometimes the answer seems to be no.

The absence of healing in the presence of disease and infirmity, even when we pray for healing, is one of those mysteries for which we don't have an answer. Why did God create a world in which such things happen? In our day, we no longer blame it on sin. Rather, it's part of the "Why do bad things happen to good people?" question. Or, more broadly, "Why are we not immortal gods, forever able to live a pleasant life without pain and suffering?" As Christians, our answer has to be that, "We don't know." But we can confidently add that, "God knows, and shares that pain and difficulty with us. He did so in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ." That is not all. We also have a promise of better things to come, beyond the curtain that is death. For, as Christ rose, we too will rise. He was the first fruits, the one to whom we look to. The one who shows us the way.

Jesus came to save us. His healing was primarily a signpost. No, it didn't have a significant immediate impact on the practice of medicine, or the general health of people, in the world at large at that time. "This is the way to live," he announced. People did follow. The world was changed. Up until then, the world seemed to continue unchanging, just cycling through the same story continually of empires and wars and poverty and suffering. But then the world began to change. By the 1600's or so, certainly within a century later, historians could easily see that, even if most people could not. In our day, we see remarkable changes in our own lifetimes. Changes for the better, overall. We can give thanks to Jesus Christ, for the religious teachings and ethics that He brought us, and what that has done for the world. Ultimately, life has been made better. The science, improvements in governance, and much else over the last two millennia, has been made possible by followers of Christ, as Rev. Zanicky has been telling us in his messages. That is true globally, even if it is still easy to find many ways in which things are not as improved as we would hope. Jesus, and the Church, have made a difference in history. We can give thanks to God.

Jesus demonstrated, in his life, God's love and mercy to us all. Those who seek Him shall find Him. We seek to follow Jesus as God may call, in each of our lives. His healing is not just for our bodies, but for our souls.

Prayer: God of healing, help us to know how to bring our friends to you when they need your touch. Amen.