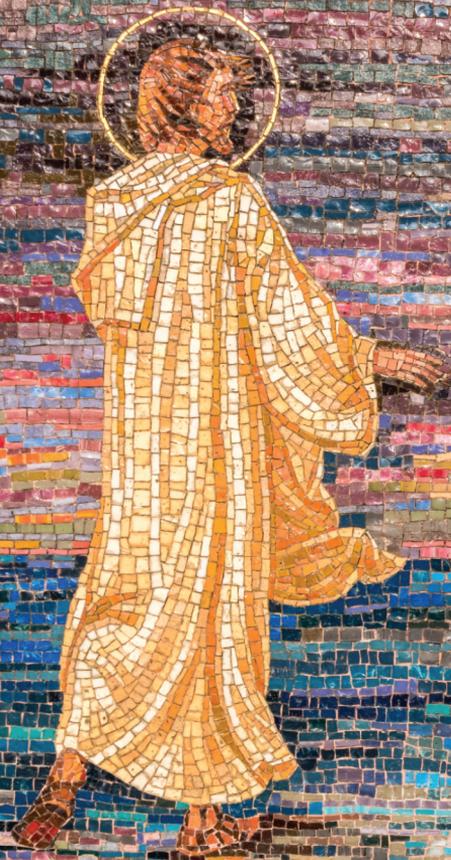


SIGNS *and* WONDERS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE *to the* MIRACLES OF JESUS



AMY-JILL
LEVINE

Signs and Wonders
A Beginner's Guide to the Miracles of Jesus

Signs and Wonders

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Signs and Wonders

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INTRODUCTION

Uncanny, Amazing, Confusing, Consoling

The Gospel writers depict Jesus as having authority over illnesses to cure, over demons to exorcise, and over nature to control. His earliest followers, and followers subsequently, have similarly regarded him as a miracle worker. In fact, the Jewish historian Josephus, who was not a Christian, likely recorded that Jesus “was a doer of wonderful works” (*Antiquities* 18.63). Although I am not a Christian, I have no difficulty in recognizing this historical memory. I doubt people would have gathered around Jesus, let alone left their homes and families to follow him, if all he had was a story about a sower who went out to sow. He must have had what we today call charisma: the ability to seem superhuman, so much so that he could calm those who were disturbed in spirit and bring a feeling of wholeness to those who felt physically incomplete.

More, he must have conveyed not only this impression but also this ability to his followers. In Acts 2:22, Peter preaches to the people of Jerusalem about “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know.” Hebrews 2:4 similarly asserts, “God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.” Indeed, these early followers, and some Christians to this

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day, continued to experience miracles: they prayed for storms to be stilled, and the weather calmed; they placed their hands on an ailing person, and the tumor shrank; they prayed to be closer to God, and they began to speak in tongues or be “slain in the Spirit.” Good timing? The power of mind over matter? Psychological openness to altered states of consciousness? Or, miracles? The answer will depend on whom we ask.

Debates over whether the miracles the New Testament records—enabling a paralyzed man to walk, stilling a storm, healing a hemorrhaging woman, multiplying loaves and fishes, restoring sight to a blind man, raising Lazarus from the dead, and many other accounts—are ultimately unhelpful. People who believe in miracles, in the sense of events that contravene what we know of nature, will believe Jesus performed them. Others, perhaps adherents to non-Christian religions, may claim that while their spiritual leaders did miracles, Jesus did not. Still others will look for scientific explanations: if a magician can make a red liquid green, so Jesus can turn water into wine. The concern to ensure Jesus was not seen as a magician was already in play by the second century. Justin Martyr, in his mid-second century Dialogue with Trypho 69.7, notes that some regarded Jesus as a sorcerer and a magician (Greek: *Magos*, as in Magi).

A few may argue that the Gospel texts have been mistranslated: Jesus did not stand “on” the water but “by” the water (how powerful prepositions can be!). Some will see Jesus as in cahoots with the people he “ostensibly” cured. Still others propose that not only was Jesus a visionary, he also taught his followers to have visions, including visions of him doing amazing things. And quite a number of critics suggest that the healings were of psychosomatic problems; Jesus does not regrow limbs, they note.

Such arguments get us nowhere on the question of history. Historians cannot state that something that contravenes the world

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as we know it happened. Belief in miracles is a matter of faith. Further, where one person sees a miracle, someone else sees the practice of medicine or an example of magic or an optical illusion. Sometimes these distinctions are gendered (here's my feminism coming to the fore): for generations, if a woman healed a person with a combination of herbs she learned from her mother, it was called witchcraft or at best "folk medicine," but if a man, with a medical degree, using the same herbs, healed a person, it was called medicine.

Either we believe in miracles of the sort the Gospels describe, or we don't. But—and here's the good news—for the stories to have value for us, the question of historicity is not of ultimate import. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the convenient designations for the authors of the Gospels—believed Jesus did miracles or, as John prefers, "signs." To understand the Gospels in their own context, it therefore helps to enter into the way the authors and their readers thought.

Now we can address what the miracle stories did, and can, mean. Additionally, we can do more than point to the obvious, which is that the miracle stories are designed to tell us something about Jesus. We learn from these stories that he has authority; he can do amazing things. We shall see how several of the miracles connect him to Israel's story: he controls nature as the God of Israel controls nature. Psalm 107:25 reports that God "commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea," and verse 29 concludes, "he made the storm be still and the waves of the sea were hushed." As the God of Israel, so Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus also must have reminded his first followers of the assurance Moses gave the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 18:15, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." This prophet could split the sea in half to allow the people to escape

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from slavery to freedom; he could make food, like manna, appear to feed the hungry. Jesus would also have reminded his followers of the great miracle-working prophets, Elijah and Elisha, both of whom also raised the dead. Further, Elijah provided the widow of Zarephath a “jar of meal [that] will not be emptied, and the jug of oil [that] will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth” (1 Kings 17:14).

More impressive still, Elisha not only heals the leprosy from Naaman the Syrian general (2 Kings 5:1-18), he also feeds one hundred men in what looks like the first draft of the feeding of the five thousand: “A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat.’ But his servant said, ‘How can I set this before a hundred people?’ So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, “They shall eat and have some left.”’ He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord” (2 Kings 4:42-44).

Because some of the miracles attributed to Jesus likely served as propaganda against pagan rivals, it is possible that the disciples either invented or elaborated upon things Jesus did in order to make their teacher look better than possible rival figures. Jesus emerges as more powerful than the Greek god of healing Asclepius, the child of Apollo and Koronis, who was raised by the gods after he died and transported to Olympus. Asclepius, who had temples throughout the Mediterranean, could also, according to those who told his stories, heal illnesses and raise the dead. Some early Christian art even depicts Jesus as looking like Asclepius. The difference between Jesus and Asclepius, at least in the early years, was that one encountered the Greek god in a temple, where a fee was charged or a donation of some sort expected. Jesus and his

early followers practiced free health care, which is another type of miracle.

The Gospels also depict Jesus as more powerful than the Emperor Vespasian and thus more powerful than anyone Rome worshipped. Suetonius, in his *Lives of the Caesars* (Ves. 7), reports that Vespasian needed to perform a miracle in order to solidify his claim to the throne, since he was not a descendant of the royal household. He then, before multiple witnesses, restored sight to a man who was blind by anointing his eyes with spit, and he restored mobility to a man who could not walk by touching his heel.

We can similarly compare Jesus to the Greek god of wine, Dionysius, who would be right at home in Cana where Jesus changes water into wine, or to his contemporary, the philosopher-healer Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 3 BCE–97 CE), whose biography, replete with mighty works such as exorcising demons and raising the dead, was composed about a century later by Philostratus. Such comparisons often take the shape of “my god is better than your god.” We do not need to play this game. Rather, the comparisons help us situate Jesus in a world where miracles were recognized, and where miracle workers were usually interrogated: Is the power to do mighty works from a benevolent source, or a malevolent one? Are the miracles designed to help others, for self-aggrandizement, or to harm others? Pretty much everyone agreed that miracles occurred; the question was what they signified.

Exorcists, a specific type of miracle worker, were also part of the culture. Our impressions of exorcisms often come from modern novels or horror films rather than from antiquity. Illnesses, such as fevers, could be ascribed to demons; hence, when Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law, he “rebukes” her fever (Luke 4:39); given that she immediately gets up from bed and begins to serve him, I’m inclined here to rebuke Jesus (“let the lady get some rest”), but

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that's a different book. Josephus (*Antiquities* 8.46-48) reports to have witnessed, personally, a fellow named Eleazar who performed exorcisms in the presence of Vespasian and his army troops. Mark 9:38 records John the Disciple saying to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." The verse suggests that people regarded Jesus's name as having supernatural ability; it also shows the presence of rival exorcists. The Book of Acts 19:15 reports a similar attempt at exorcism, but this one doesn't work, as "the evil spirit said to them [exorcists who are not disciples], 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?'" This scene, which is meant to be humorous, concludes with the notice, "Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:16).

We need not, however, think of being possessed as necessarily a bad thing. The issue is the one doing the possessing. For example, people who believe in the Holy Spirit, active in the world, might think of Jesus as "possessed" by this Spirit, just as others are possessed by Satan or demons. This understanding would have made sense to a first-century person.

Jesus's miracles are also comparable to miracles performed by rabbis known from post-biblical Jewish sources, rabbis such as Honi the Circle-Drawer, who can control the rain, and Haninah ben Dosa, whose prayers are efficacious in healing and whose miracles included making loaves of bread appear miraculously in the oven lest his poor wife be shamed that the household had no food (b. Taanit 24a/b; thank you, Hanina, who was also known for his poverty; his wife may have had other thoughts). However, unlike the Gospels, which celebrate the mighty works of Jesus, the rabbinic sources overall promote the wisdom of the sages rather than the

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charismatic miracle workers. For the rabbis, more important than individual figures who perform signs and wonders and speak only on their own authority are students and teachers—activities that do not require supernatural talents—who work within the community structure. Rabbinic sources are more likely to talk about ongoing care for the sick rather than miraculous cures.

The rabbinic sources do help us put the Gospel miracle accounts into perspective. If our major sense of Jesus is “great miracle worker,” we’ve missed the point of the New Testament. Paul does not mention the miracles; he stresses what he sees as the central point: the faithfulness of Jesus in going to the cross, and the faithfulness of God in resurrecting him. Although about 40 percent of Mark’s Gospel concerns miracle stories in various forms, Mark’s Jesus with some consistency tells people who have witnessed or experienced the miracles to remain quiet about them. For Mark, Jesus should be seen primarily as the Son of Man who “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31).

Together with the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, the rabbinic sources show us that miracle-working was not the primary role of the messiah, at least according to most Jewish messianic expectations. The messiah, or the two messiahs known from the Dead Sea Scrolls, was the agent who brought about the messianic age, the time when all bodies are resurrected from the dead, and all bodies and minds are whole. Yet, there were also at the time of Jesus various “signs prophets,” as they have come to be called. For example, Josephus (*Antiquities* 20:97-98; compare to Acts 5:36) mentions a fellow named Theudas, who promised to divide the Jordan River (see Joshua 3:15-17). Make a big enough promise, and the crowds will come.

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In fact, what look like signs or miracles may prove not divine authority, but Satanic ability. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10a, Paul (or perhaps a follower, writing in Paul's name) warns, "The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders and every kind of wicked deception. . . ." Even Jesus gets accused of being in league with the devil. As the Pharisees charge, "It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that this fellow casts out demons" (Matthew 12:24).

Why then record the miracles? They were not necessary. While Paul may have told his followers in Galatia, Thessalonica, and Philippi that Jesus did miracles, he does not appeal to those miracles in providing them the exhortations they need. He notes that people in the assemblies gathered in Jesus's name do miracles, but he downplays miracles as well as speaking in tongues in favor of the speaking wisdom and knowledge through the Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12:9-10, 29). Thomas Jefferson's edited Bible famously omits all the miracles, which he found to be superstitious nonsense. As a Deist, miracles did not fit his rational view of the world (he provides a fascinating discussion point for those who insist the "founding fathers" were promoting a "Christian" nation—that's another book too). Many people today can, and many do, follow Jesus not because of the miracles and even despite the miracle stories, but because they find compelling his ethical teachings and actions or his courage at the cross. But miracle stories in the Gospels do serve a number of functions.

Alongside presenting the evangelists' Christologies, their views of Jesus, connecting Jesus to the Scriptures of Israel, and presenting Jesus as greater than anything the Gentile world had to offer, the stories still have something to say to readers today. Whether we understand the Gospel accounts to be records of what happened, or we see them primarily as legends that developed as impressions

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of Jesus passed from storyteller to storyteller, or as theological reflections on how the followers of Jesus came to understand him, the stories still have power. They project us into a world where amazement is possible. Like parables, they help us see the world otherwise.

Miracle stories can also make us nervous, because miracle workers have powers most of us cannot control or withstand. Miracle workers upset the order of things; they change the way we understand the world. When we read of Jesus exorcising a demon, or a legion of them, we sense the power of evil, or despair, even as we have the thought that only something supernatural can break us out of a world of pain or disappointment. For a moment, entering the story, we have renewed hope.

However, such stories can also do damage, so we need at the beginning of this study to clear out the unhelpful readings (we'll return to such matters in the chapters that follow). The miracle accounts should not lead us into despair. While the Synoptic accounts of Jesus's "mighty works" (Greek: *dynameis*) several times connect faith or trust (the Greek term, *pistis*, means both) in Jesus to the performance of the miracle, it is not the case that a failure to receive a miracle is the result of faulty faith.

Similarly, we should resist the tendency, which is part of the rhetoric of the Gospels and their reception, to associate disability with sin. The people Jesus exorcises or heals in the Gospel texts are not described as being blind, unable to walk, deaf, or otherwise desiring of a therapeutic touch because they are sinful. The Book of Job, in which the *sinless* Job is reduced to sitting on a dung heap and scratching his diseased body, breaks the connection between personal illness and sin. It is better to read the healing narratives as stories that take notice of both human suffering and the need to attend to it, which means health care.

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John's Gospel, which uses the word "signs" (*semeia*, as in semiotics) and sometimes "signs and wonders" for the seven (of course, seven, the perfect number) signs Jesus performs, tends to use the signs as proof of Jesus's identity. Thus for the Synoptics, miracles generally require faith; for John, they often create faith.

On John's seven signs, they do make a marvelous trivia game (like naming the seven deadly sins, the seven wonders of the ancient world, or, more benignly, Snow White's seven helpers). They are: the changing water into wine at Cana (2:1-11), the healing of the royal official's son at Capernaum (4:46-45; this story is John's version of the healing of the centurion's servant in Capernaum in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10), the healing of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15), feeding the five thousand (6:5-14), walking on water (6:16-21), healing a man who was born blind (John 9:1-7), and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45). Compared to the Synoptics, these accounts in John are much longer.

We can think of miracles as events that contravene nature. The problem here is that we do not know everything there is to know about nature. It may be more helpful to think of miracles that amaze us, so much that they stop us in our tracks. With these stories, we can picture bodies that behave as we would want them to behave. We see nature in its destructive power, and then realize we have to address the devastation it can cause, to anyone. With these stories, we are transported to a world far, far away, and then we bring that ancient text into our modern context. For a miracle to work, it should change those who receive it. The task now, and the joy, is to see how the miracle stories can work on us.

Chapter 1 considers the story of the paralyzed man whose helpers (friends? family?) take apart a roof to get him to Jesus. Here we find the import of caregivers, the need for drastic action, how location can have symbolic functions, the import of familial

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language, a de-coupling of sin and disability, a discussion of what “forgiveness” and “blasphemy” mean, a parallel story in John 5, and a meditation on service.

In chapter 2, the stilling of the storm opens up questions of: the power of nature; life and death on the sea; the connections of Jesus to the prophet Jonah; Mark’s sometimes negative depiction of the disciples; the encouragement not only to call for divine rescue, but also to lament, strongly, when it does not come; the implications of the term *faith*; Jesus as model for behavior; and ecology.

Along with numerous allusions to the Scriptures of Israel, chapter 3’s story of the “Feeding of the five thousand”—a mistitled story, since as Matthew notes, the number doesn’t include the women and the children—we get notices of sustainability and food insecurity, hospitality, the importance of meals, the meaning of Bethsaida, the relation of healing to teaching, the multiple symbolic meanings of the wilderness, the visceral concern for empty bellies, recollections of food production and so gender roles, and an anticipation of the messianic banquet.

In chapter 4, combined stories of a woman suffering from hemorrhages and a desperate father seeking a healing, and then a resuscitation for his daughter, show the powerful narrative technique of “intercalation,” of sandwiching one story within another. They open discussion to matters of gender, social class, economic leverage, women’s bodies, family membership, what it means to “follow,” how suspense works in narrative, health care advocacy, an extraordinary act of courage, a detaching of physical problems (or even “women’s problems”) and shame, and Jesus’s restoring two people not only to life but also to ritual purity,

We return to Bethsaida in chapter 5, our discussion of the only two-stage healing, here of restoring sight to a blind man. The narrative context proves decisive in understanding the story, for

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it anticipates the two-stage confession that Peter will make to Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" in the next scene. From connections to earlier stories, including allusions to the Book of Tobit from the Deuterocanonical texts/Old Testament Apocrypha and to Plato's *Timaeus*, to the problems of our common usage of "blind" as a term for lacking spiritual insight, to Mark's focus not on miracles but on suffering, to the role of health care advocates, to the need for our now-sighted person to adjust to new life, we shall be able to "see" things with new eyes.

Chapter 6 introduces the greatest of Jesus's signs in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus. John's chapter is very long, so here we focus on Lazarus and his sisters: the emotional strain of living with a very ill relative and then facing that loved one's death, how illness and death can both unite and divide families, the ability to express both disappointment and even anger in prayer, and perhaps most important, the question of who we become after we have had an experience of death: Who are we when we emerge from the tomb?

Our conclusion will open new ways of reading several of the other miracle stories. There is never any single "right" way of reading a text. Each encounter with the same words may spark new ideas that we didn't see coming. Amazing. Each discussion of the same text may create new insights that challenge old views. Astonishing. Each person, every group, will find something new. Extraordinary. Miracles may be all around us, depending on our perspectives.

CHAPTER 1

“Take up your pallet and walk”

On the Role of Caregivers (Mark 2:1-12)

To be a caregiver is in today’s idiom to be a “necessary worker.” It means that others are dependent on you. It means also that you will have little time for yourself. While there is a great deal in the New Testament about self-emptying, about being in service or even a slave to others, about sacrificing oneself for the concerns of humanity, it is also the case that a burned-out individual is of no help to anyone. If we don’t start with self-care, we cannot effectively care for others.

When we care for another, we might think of caring not as a job, as in “health care worker”; we might think of this care as both an emotional investment (along the lines of “it is important to me personally, I ‘care’ about how those who are in my care feel”) and an ethical imperative (if we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and we are to love the stranger who dwells among us, then we need to care for them). More, we are also to love our enemies, whoever they are. No one said this is easy.

Caring for others and caring for oneself should be a joint process in various ways. First, such caring, in the biblical model,

suggests a relationship between caregiver and care-receiver. Second, caregiving should be a community-based model. Caregivers bring the man to Jesus, and so we find a collaborative effort.

All these points, and more, shine in the story in which the caregiver Jesus heals a paralyzed man, brought to him by other caregivers. The healing narrative in Mark 2:1-12 is a partnership story of persistence, resilience, and transformation of all involved.

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. (Mark 2:1)

Typically, readers skip over temporal and geographical markers: an hour later, a week later, two days later, in Capernaum, in Bethany. We do this in part because the locations mentioned in the Bible, with possible exceptions like Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Gethsemane, tend to blend into each other. Capernaum, Bethany, Bethsaida... who cares? We also ignore times, especially when all our days blend into one timeless blob. Monday is no different from Tuesday. Such disconnect between place and time has become more acute for me, especially during COVID-19. The Gospel tells us to take a moment (a temporal marker) and determine why time and place matter.

Jesus “returned to Capernaum”—our first concern is what he had done there before. Why this place at this time? The name Capernaum is a combination of the Hebrew *k’far*, which means “village,” and the name Nahum, which you may know from one of the prophets in the Book of the Twelve. Thus Capernaum, which may sound unfamiliar, is really Nahumsville or Nahumsburg. Mark’s first reference to Capernaum is earlier in the chapter, at Mark 1:21 we read, “They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.” But Mark does not concentrate on the teaching. Instead, Capernaum becomes primarily a place of healing.

“Take up your pallet and walk”

In the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus encounters a “man with an unclean spirit” (Mark 1:23). Today, in the industrialized West, we are inclined to think of this man, or any “possessed” person in the Bible, as someone behaving in a manner that disrupts normal activity. A number of readers today think of the “unclean spirit” as the ancient equivalent of someone on the autism spectrum, or a person who behaves in ways the majority population sees as inappropriate, for example, the teenager in the church who calls out during the sermon or the senior citizen who decides to dance in the aisle while the collection is taken. Thus we equate stories of demon possession with a biological or medical problem in what is known as the mental-health category.

There are two immediate problems with this approach. The first is that it fails to see how determining what behavior is aberrant is often a matter of culture. In some times and places, spontaneous shouts or dancing have been and can be seen as actions of the Holy Spirit. Here is why the term “unclean” matters: the unclean spirit will lead to disruption rather than to the upbuilding of the community.

The second problem with such readings is that they threaten to stigmatize people who are already often stigmatized. The very sound of “unclean spirit” suggests something icky or gross. This is not, however, how the possessed man is treated in the Gospels. He is not ostracized or even stigmatized, since the problem is external to him. The spirit is something that has invaded him, and Jesus is in the position to stop the invasion and expel the occupying force.

The fellow with the unclean spirit appears in a synagogue. No one seeks to escort him out. He may have been there the entire time. No one thought it was odd to have him there. All those texts that insist that if you are “unclean” you cannot be in a synagogue are wrong. To the contrary, we can see him, and anyone like him, as welcome in a place where we assemble.

The man cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). He speaks in the plural, since more than one demon possesses him. For people in antiquity, the issue is not mental illness or biological glitches; it is a team of demons.

Demons may be malevolent, but they are often not stupid. The demons know who Jesus is, when the people in the synagogue and even his disciples haven’t much of a clue. At the same time, the demons know that in Jesus’s presence, they haven’t a chance.

The demons know Jesus is from Nazareth, and they also know that he is the “Holy One of God.” They recognize his embeddedness in a place, Nazareth, a village in Galilee, not too far from Capernaum. And they recognize that he also transcends that place in his relationship to God. We are always part of where we were from, and we are always more than that.

In antiquity, to name someone is to have power over that person, so the demons may be seeking to get leverage over Jesus. Jesus is having none of this. He rebukes the demons by telling them, “Be silent and come out of him.” In modern terms, “Shut up and get out.” Sometimes we need to be direct. This time, it works, and the unclean spirit makes its exit.

The scene ends as it began. In Mark 1:22, the synagogue congregation is “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” That is, he doesn’t cite his teachers, and he may not even be citing the biblical text. He is telling the congregation what he sees to be the central teaching that they need to hear. The message is likely “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). This is your moment, he tells his fellow Jews. Judgment day is near, as is the Jubilee; the time of self-introspection, reconciliation, and ethical action has come. Get with the program.

“Take up your pallet and walk”

In 1:27, the end of the story, Mark gives a neat narrative frame. Witnessing the exchange between Jesus and the demon, the people in the synagogue “were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’” The content of the initial teaching has to be recovered from an earlier verse, but the new teaching concerns the ability to command unclean spirits. In modern terms, the new teaching is not just a form of engagement with those who require health care. The Scriptures of Israel have already insisted on health care. The new part is the connection of health care to the coming near of the kingdom of God. Caring for others is not just a marker of fidelity to Torah; it is a sign, a foretaste, of what the world was intended to be.

Jesus can defeat the unclean spirits not simply because he is the Holy One of God; he is also the fellow from Nazareth, down the street and over the hill. He can defeat the unclean spirits because—wait for it—he is in intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. It was not that many verses ago where Mark 1:10-11 reports, “And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

To have the spirit is thus to be in the health care business; the job is to drive away those unclean spirits that would keep anyone from fully participating in the community. In several New Testament texts, to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit come together. Anyone who is baptized, therefore, is commissioned to fight those unclean spirits and to drive them away.

Granted, this is easier for Jesus than it is for his followers. Miracles are few and far between in the health care field, especially for those who have conditions for which no cures are available. So we start with what we’ve got:

First, in Capernaum people who are possessed are still recognized as members of the community; they are not excluded from the synagogue; they are loved family members and neighbors who require help.

Second, the synagogue—the term comes from the Greek prefix *syn*, which means “together,” as in sympathy or symphony, and the verb *ago*, which means to gather. Thus a synagogue is a place where people gather together. It is where Torah is read and discussed, praises to God are sung, and prayers are said. It is also, so we see, a place where health care can be found.

Third, for those who have some connection to the Holy Spirit (don't forget baptism!), the good fight can be fought.

Mark 1:28 ends with the notice that following this exorcism, “At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” When Jesus then, in just a few short verses, returns to Capernaum, more than just the locals who were in the synagogue that day are thinking of him as an exorcist. The reputation is out, the news has spread.

For the healing story that follows, as we've seen, Mark states that Jesus had returned to Capernaum, and “after some days, it was reported that he was at home” (2:1). I'm intrigued by that temporal marker: “after some days.” The temporal marker fits the plot as it gives people from places outside Capernaum time to journey to Jesus. But I think it does more. Jesus is at home, and I picture him resting there. Health care is hard work, even for the Holy One of God. Health care requires down time, being home, being present to oneself.

Nor is Jesus putting out a shingle saying, “doctor is in.” He is not seeking for more to do. “It was reported that he was at home.” Perhaps, had the word not gotten out, he could have spent more than a few days on personal care. But as health care workers know, if people know you care, they will ask for it.

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The story leaves us also with questions. We think of Capernaum as the place where Jesus taught and exorcised, and we remember the exorcism. Can we also remember the initial teachings about the kingdom, the need for repentance and hence reconciliation, the sense that divine justice is breaking through? We might think of Jesus as “the Holy One of God,” which in Mark’s story is a correct identification. Can we also think of him as “Jesus of Nazareth,” a human being who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is courageous enough to rebuke demons?

So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. (Mark 2:2-4).

Most houses in lower Galilee, even the larger ones, could not accommodate more than a few dozen people. For Mark, the numbers are not important; the focus is on how people want to get to Jesus. For Jesus, the importance is what he is teaching, “the word,” the message that the kingdom is at hand, and what that timing requires. But he is interrupted. His house has suddenly become a hospital.

We return, momentarily, to that initial synagogue scene. The term Mark uses for the point that “many gathered” is actually a form of the word “synagogue” (for those of you interested in grammar, it’s a third plural aorist passive indicative of *syn + ago*). We miss this connection in the English. Any house can be a synagogue, and any house, or synagogue, can be a hospital. The community that gathers is a place of both prayer and healing. We also see that some priorities need to be in place. The demon-possessed man

disrupted Jesus's teaching, and Jesus takes the time to perform the exorcism. Now, the stalwart friends engage in property damage to get the paralyzed man to Jesus. Not only have they interrupted his teaching, they've also prevented the home from functioning like a home. It's now something else: a building with a skylight.

This opening up, on the narrative level, can be taken as funny (yes, it's okay to see humor in the text). On the theological level, the removal of the roof by digging through—Mark presumes a mud-based room; in Luke's version, the mud is replaced with tile; Luke is thinking of a more upscale setting—calls God to witness. On the ethical level, the story tells us that, to find a healing, one does what one can, even if means tearing down whatever barrier is keeping us from obtaining the healing. The roof is red-tape or insurance forms or buildings that are not accessible to people in wheelchairs... you can name these other barriers easily. And on a pastoral level, the story shows the efforts less of the paralyzed man than of those who accompanied him. They, along with Jesus, are our caregivers.

I do not know who these bed-bearers are. They could be friends, relatives, servants, or even slaves. They could be both men and women (the verbs are masculine plural, and in Greek, masculine plurals can include both men and women). We can only get a sense of who they are by the actions that they take (as Jesus says, twice, in the Sermon on the Mount, "you will know them by their fruits" [Matthew 7:16, 20]). They are people who go to extraordinary means to get health care for a man who is paralyzed. The focus of these verses is not on the man; it is on the health care workers.

The text reminds me of Galatians 6:1-2, where Paul writes, "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." As with Paul's point about transgressions, so our story will continue with a concern for

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sin and forgiveness. As with bearing the burdens of another, we can see the paralyzed one as a “burden,” but, better, we can see him as a blessing, since by carrying him, those who bear him up are shown to be models of faith. Yes, health care can be a burden; the goal is to see it rather as a blessing, since it is means by which one’s faith can be made present.

These individuals are the ones who do the physical labor, or what we would call today the “heavy lifting.” What they did was not easy, and—unless they are slaves—it was not expected. Opening a roof is not on the regular to-do list. What they did was extraordinary. And everyone would have noticed. Their actions, in turn, lead to the healing

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, (‘Son,’ NRSV) your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:5)

This verse is weird, for several reasons. We’ll go step by step. First, Mark returns our eyes to Jesus. We had been picturing the people on the roof, digging through the mud and the thatch, lowering the man down on his bed (a major feat of engineering). We recall the crowds, so tight that the paralyzed man and his caregivers could not get through the door. We have been distracted from the teaching. Suddenly Mark returns us to Jesus.

And Jesus goes right for what is of import. He doesn’t mention the property damage or the engineering or immediately even the man on the bed. He mentions the faith of the caregivers. Mark makes clear that Jesus “saw” the faith, because faith is something less than you “believe” and more something that you “do.” Faith is something that can be seen. As the Epistle of James rephrases, “Faith without works is also dead” (James 2:26).

I do wonder if the caregivers knew that Jesus saw their faith. Personally, I would have been happier had Jesus said to the caregivers, “Well done, good and faithful friends,” or even if the fellow on the

bed extended his thanks. I want the efforts of the caregivers to be acknowledged. So often, even today, they are not. We all know what it is like to be taken for granted. More, it is often difficult for those who receive care to express their thanks: some do not know what they think to be the right words; some are embarrassed; some are incapable of speech. But perhaps Mark is telling us that the care we give, the time we take, the extra mile we go—they are all noticed. Jesus saw what the caregivers did. For those who believe in a heavenly God, then God knows what we do (and Santa knows if we've been naughty or nice). The Bible does not teach us to do good works in order to get the proverbial “points in heaven.” Nor did first-century Jews have a legalistic sense (whenever the term “legalism” shows up in biblical studies, you can figure that it will be bad for the Jews) in which they sought to earn divine love. They already had that. They followed Torah in response to that love, and when they followed Torah, they necessarily became caregivers.

A celebration of what the caregivers did would be nice, an acknowledgment appropriate, but that notice often comes rather in the silence. Whether theist or not, we all know that what we do is noticed, for we notice our own actions. My mother told me that the first judge of actions should be our own conscience. She noted that if I thought that I had done the right thing, that can be a point of personal pride in the sense of satisfaction.

Despite all those warnings in Proverbs about how “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18; we might speculate on the relationship of a “haughty spirit” to an “unclean spirit”), I see nothing wrong in personally rejoicing over a job well done, a love manifest, a care shown. Even without the thank-you note, I still know that I did the right thing. That is (usually) enough.

Mark tells us that Jesus saw their “faith.” The Greek term translated “faith” is *pistis*, and it also has the meaning of “trust.” The verse

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thus raises the questions: Faith in what? Trust in what? The most accessible meaning is faith or trust that Jesus can make this person walk. But I see no reason to limit this faith. Perhaps we could add another connotation: Jesus saw their faith and trust in their own ability to get the paralyzed man to him. They may well have had faith in Jesus. But they may also have had faith or trust in themselves. They managed, despite heavy odds against them, let alone a heavy fellow on a bed, to carry the paralyzed man safely, without dropping him; get him up on the rooftop; get him down through the hole they dug; lower him safely to the ground. If we are to have faith in God, then it often helps to have some faith in ourselves as well, or at least faith that God will give us the ability to do what needs to be done. My preference is to think of us and God working as a partnership.

I'm also not thrilled with the phrase, “*he said to the paralytic.*” It would be nice to know the fellow's name. The demons managed to name Jesus, so why doesn't Jesus ask the man, “What's your name?” In fact, given that Mark sometimes presents Jesus as prescient, he probably already knows it. More, I'm uncomfortable with the idea of identifying someone by symptomology. I do not like the older hospital routine of speaking of “the heart-valve patient in room 235”; better would be “Dr. Levine in room 235.” Yet I also see how the symptom, at the moment, is the salient feature. In Gospel healing narratives, we do not get the names of those to whom Jesus bestows health care; instead, we have people-as-symptoms: the hemorrhaging woman, the blind man, the deaf man, and so on.

But for Mark, each of these identifications will need to be changed, for the woman is no longer bleeding; the blind man can see; the deaf man can hear. To identify a person by what, at the time and place, is considered to be a weakness or a handicap or an ailment, does not get at the heart of who the person is.

Even “Bartimaeus son of Timaeus,” the blind beggar who calls out to Jesus in Jericho (Mark 10:46), is not really named Bartimaeus. “Bar” is Aramaic for son (of), as in Barabbas (son of the father), Barsabbas (son of an old man; this is the fellow in the running for the apostolic role following Judas’s defection; see Acts 1:23; 15:22), Barnabas, which Luke translates as “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), Bar Kochba (son of the star; he was a Jewish messianic figure who lived a century after Jesus), and even bar mitzvah, literally, “son of the commandment,” the identification of a Jewish boy, age thirteen, who is regarded as an adult by the congregation. Bartimaeus means “Timaeus’s son”; his name was not “bar.” For those who might be wondering if the heraldic marking, the bar sinister, is Jewish, the answer is no.

We’re still on the same verse, since every word is replete with meaning. Next is Jesus’s address to the fellow: “*Son...*” or “*Child...*” I think the NRSV gets it wrong here. The Greek is *teknon*, the same term used for the children of Bethlehem slaughtered by Herod’s soldiers (Matthew 2:18). In Mark’s Gospel, the term does have the sense of “little children who require the aid of others.” Following the appearance of the term in 2:5, we hear it again next in 7:27, “He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’” The other uses, which you can explore on your own, include Mark 10:24, as an address to the disciples (in Mark, the disciples fail to understand Jesus), Mark 10:29-30 on the new family gathered in the name of Jesus; Mark 12:19 on biological children, and Mark 13:12 on how children will rise against parents over their confession of the Christ as Lord.

Jesus’s address to the fellow as “child” also reminds me of his address to the woman whom he had cured of hemorrhages, “Daughter, your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34; Matthew 9:22; Luke 8:48). Whether we read Mark 2:5 as “son” or “child,” we have familial language that shows a relationship of care. For Jesus

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to call the fellow “child” puts Jesus in the role of father. And fathers, at the time, had responsibilities to their children. Both Judaism and Christianity have prayers that address God as “Father,” with the sense not of distance, but of intimate closeness. So far, so good.

On the other hand, I wonder where this fellow’s biological father is: Is the dad one of the people who carried him on his bed? Or is the father at home working, perhaps wondering why his son thought this healer he had heard about in the Galilean rumor mill was the real deal? Is he friends perhaps with the father of James and John, back in the boat when the two left off mending their nets to follow the man from Nazareth who summoned them? Or is he home, in his house, caring for other members of the family who are ailing?

Much has been written on the metaphor of God as Father, on how the masculine language is off-putting to some, how having a dysfunctional father makes it difficult to think of God as a father, how speaking of God as father is a means of insisting that the emperor, the “Father of the country,” is not the true father, and so on. Less has been written on what it means to be called “son” or “daughter” or “child” by Jesus. When Jesus speaks of the new family he is drawing to himself, he asserts, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). No one in this household is classified as a child. Yet Jesus himself is consistently identified as a “son” whether “Son of David” or “Son of Man” or “Son of God.”

I like the idea that both Jesus and the person he heals are both children and sons. Both at one point will have bodies that cannot function on their own; the fellow is carried to Jesus, just as the body of Jesus will be carried by Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb. Both will rise, literally. Both live in relationship to a father.

The address of “child” also helps us recognize that we do not know how old this fellow on the bed is. Although the NRSV calls him a “paralyzed man” (Mark 2:3), the Greek calls him a “paralytic”

(*paralytikos*) without the “man.” He could be ten, or twenty, or seventy. He’s got to be old enough to have a conception of sin, and he’s got to be big enough to carry his own bed back to his house. Perhaps we are to think of him as in his early teens, as an adult but not quite, as someone who has yet to live life to the fullest because he is dependent on others to get him from place to place. Granted, a man in his sixties or seventies can still be called son (my husband is sixty-eight, and both his parents, in their mid-nineties, still sometimes refer to him as “son,” particularly on birthday cards), but I like to think of this fellow with the bed as much younger. His whole life is in front of him, and he can live it to its fullest because the people on whom he depended acted on his behalf.

We might wonder: Who carried us when we could not carry ourselves? More, when have we been in the role of children, because we could not make it on our own and needed to be supported. I suspect that at some point we all yearn to be children again: to be taken care of by others; to be carried when we lack the physical capacity or mental stamina to go it on our own. We speak of being “babied,” but that’s not necessarily a bad thing (as long as we don’t make a habit of it).

The final part of the verse, *your sins are forgiven*, deserves an entire book. If we start by asking, “What sins?” the answer is, “we don’t know.” The point here is not “original sin” in the sense of a sin inherited from Adam and Eve’s disobedience in Eden; that’s not a first-century Jewish idea. But it is the case that everyone sins. That is why we have repentance, and that is why Jesus begins his ministry with the call to repent.

Nor is the point to connect paralysis with sin, as if disability is the result of sin. That is not the dominant first-century Jewish view either. Just as, in the first Capernaum story, demon possession is not the fault of the possessed man, so in this story paralysis is not the fault of the man on the bed. Unless we are specifically told that

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blindness or deafness or paralysis or whatever other situation keeps people from living what they would see to be life abundant, then the symptom is on a different register than sin. When the Scriptures of Israel speak about disability as the punishment for sin—for example, Deuteronomy 28:27 tells the people that if they violate the covenant, “The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed”—they do not refer to individuals; the focus is on what we would call a “sick society.” Perfectly healthy people can sin; people who rely on others to take them from place to place may be blameless.

Nor again, contrary to some recent readings of Jesus as uplifting the marginal, the “sins” Jesus forgives are not “debts” in the sense of financial obligations owed to others. The Greek term here is “sin” not “debt”—while the word “debt” was used, in Semitic languages, to refer to sins, the term “sins” was not used to refer to debt. Nor is it the case that God alone can forgive an economic debt. God is in the sin-forgiving business, not the banking industry. We can speculate that the man himself was not among the rich, in that Mark describes his vehicle as a “mat” (Greek: *krabbatos*) and not a bed. On the other hand, if one is going to schlep a paralyzed person from healer to healer, the mat is lighter, easier to carry, and easier to maneuver into crowded spaces. Similarly, while the house is not an elite dwelling (as we’ve noted, Luke’s version turns the thatch roof into a tile roof, and so giving the scene an upgrade), the room is nevertheless big enough for a crowd.

I understand the desire to make every act of Jesus an act of economic reform and of demolishing class-based distinctions. But the way to get there is not to misinterpret first-century Judaism or impose on the text something that is not there. The better approach is to see what the text actually says.

The strange thing about Mark’s story is that the sins are forgiven before the fellow repents. Nor are we told that he ever did repent.

The verb form is in the passive: Jesus does not say that he is doing the forgiving; he states that the sins are forgiven, with the implication that the one doing the forgiving is God (the Father). Jesus proclaims what has already happened.

This forgiveness is part of the message of the cross: the cross creates forgiveness prior to repentance; people are therefore to respond to this forgiveness by repenting. The idea is not as odd as it may seem (or, at least it seemed odd to me when I first heard it). Forgiveness, given graciously, with no strings attached, can prompt a positive response. The fellow on the bed will be given a new form of life, one in which he is not dependent on others for movement and access—will he pay it forward? Will he form new communities of interdependence?

More, will he be able to overcome the guilt he might feel for all the time his caregivers helped him? Are his sins not the typical ones of greed or lust or pride, but perhaps those self-harming sins (at least I think of them as sins), such as thinking “I’m not worthy of the attention they give me” or “I’ll never be able to thank them for their care” or “I’ll never be able to compensate them for the time they took caring for me rather than caring for themselves”?

When I speak of these ideas as sinful, my intent is not to add more guilt to those already burdened. Heaven forbid. My intent to remind all of us who have been in care to know that the issue is not how “worthy” we are. We are all in the image of God; we are all part of the human community; we all deserve to have our bodies treated with respect. Next, our relationships should not be based on a quid pro quo model, where each act of kindness is tallied up and reciprocated. In some cases, there cannot be, and need not be, reciprocation. We all have different resources and different capabilities. Sometimes a “thank you” is sufficient. We should not have to repeat it every time we see the person, but our gratitude can be displayed in our actions.

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Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:6-7)

Just when we think we’ve got a good news moment, dissension occurs. Mark is such a remarkable storyteller: our focus is now on the question of forgiveness of sin. What happened to the question of whether this man, given the enormous efforts of the friends and the equally enormous displacement of all the people in the room, will be able to walk? Poor fellow, just when it looks like things are on the up-and-up (literally) for him, suddenly the health care is interrupted with a theological debate.

Even more extraordinarily, Mark does not tell us what the scribes said; the questioning is in their hearts. I like this image, since it relates to the body. When I see something that bothers me, or when I hear something that sounds very wrong, my blood pressure goes up. The text makes us, unexpectedly, attend to our own bodies. It also prompts us with the question: When do we speak up and when do we remain silent? It seems to me that if the scribes thought Jesus was speaking blasphemously, they ought to have said something.

What do we do when someone says something that strikes us as “blasphemous”—indeed, how do we understand blasphemy today? In the first century there was, given the diversity of Jewish views on pretty much everything, debate on what constituted blasphemy. The only other time Mark uses the term, which is in the Greek, *blasphemias*, is at the hearing before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asks Jesus, “Are you the Messiah [Greek is *christos*], the Son of the Blessed One?” When Jesus replies, “I am,” the priest asserts, “You have heard his blasphemy” (Mark 14:62-64). The problem here is that Jesus did not blaspheme, at least according to any historical

source that we can trace. To call oneself “[God’s] anointed,” which is what the term *messiah* means, is not a blasphemy. It may get you ridiculed; it may also, given Rome’s concern for any who would claim a kingly role, get you killed. But it would not get you stoned. The high priest, after setting up a rigged court with false witnesses, comes up with an illegal verdict.

I wonder—what if we speculated today on what counts as blasphemy? Are there words that would get us killed or, more likely in the USA, canceled? Are there images that should not be tolerated? At what point do we speak out, and at what point do we just let our blood pressure rise, but do nothing either to bring it down or to prevent the prompt from reoccurring? I’d like to think that one of the reasons Jesus is less-than-pleased with the scribes’ reaction is that they do not say what they are thinking. We have a choice: On the one hand, to think one thing and do another can be a type of hypocrisy. On the other hand, as the saying goes, sometimes discretion is the better part of valor. How do we tell the difference?

Finally, the scribes have overthought the situation. Jesus did not say, “I forgive you” (active voice). He said, “Your sins are forgiven” (passive voice). He is announcing what God has done. Should we read Jesus as here acting as God would act, Mark would likely be pleased with that takeaway.

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:8-9)

Mark tells us that “Jesus perceived in his spirit,” but Mark does not specify how to understand the terms. We can take a miraculous or theological approach and see Jesus as telepathic: he can read

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minds. Conversely, we can see the Holy Spirit as instructing him, as it gives him an extra boost of insight. Or, for those of us less inclined to the miraculous, personally I think he knows because he understands human nature. Most, if not all of us, can tell when someone is thinking negative thoughts about us. We say something, and the response is a frown, a down-turned mouth, a snort, or the ever-annoying rolling of the eyes.

Nor is Jesus surprised. To announce, out of the blue, “your sins are forgiven,” is bound to get some sort of reaction. As for his question about which is easier—to say, “your sins are forgiven” or to say, “stand up”—on the surface, we have a trick question, along the lines of “What color is the White House?” or “Who’s buried in Grant’s tomb?” Anyone can *say* anything. The difficulty is not in the saying, but in having the words be more than sounds made with the mouth. As we’ve noted, one term for thinking one thing but saying another is “hypocrisy.” The expressions for saying something and not making good on it also include “talk is cheap” (I’ve heard it was P.T. Barnum who said, “Talk is cheap until you hire a lawyer”) and “easier said than done.”

When we think about Jesus’s question, we realize how profound our wrestling with it might be. The simple answer “your sins are forgiven” is easier, because, in fact, who would know? But if we are honest with ourselves, we are just as aware of cheap grace as we are that talk is cheap. It is one thing to proclaim “you are forgiven”; it is something else to feel it. When we feel that our apology for something has been sincerely accepted, we sometimes feel as if a burden has been lifted. We feel it in our body: our eyes fill with tears of gratitude; our hearts stop beating so swiftly when we encounter the person we’ve hurt, we don’t feel the need to flee; we stand up straighter because we are no longer burdened by guilt or shame.

It is this response in the body that brings us to the fellow on the bed. The greater miracle in terms of spectacle is the fellow who stands up, picks up his mat, and walks. But for those who feel the burden of sin—as the idiom goes, sin can paralyze us—the greater miracle is forgiveness. At times, the burden of sin can result in actual paralysis. My point is not that the inability to walk should be associated with sin; heaven forbid. People are paralyzed for numerous catastrophic accidents, ALS or cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and strokes—the list goes on. This is not a matter of sin.

For the first readers of Mark, the takeaway would not have been, “this fellow is guilty, his guilt so traumatized him that he became paralyzed, and Jesus forgave him.” The takeaway was “this fellow could not walk, and now he can because of Jesus.” Today, we may want to read psychological explanations into the story and see Jesus as anticipating Freud. But if we do, we should remember that Freud’s patients whose bodies were not reacting as they should were not purveyors of sin. They were victims of abuse.

Jesus asked the question: Which is easier to say? We might rephrase: Which is of greater value? Which would you want more? Which is the greater gift, and to whom?

“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” (Mark 2:10-11)

Jesus, here using his favorite self-identification “Son of Man” (which would take an entire book to explain, so we’ll simply note that he is referring to himself, that the term has salvific connotations as we see in Daniel 7:13 [the NRSV translates the Aramaic of Daniel’s text as “like a human being”] and the noncanonical 1 Enoch, and that the term also connects Jesus with all of humanity),

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tells the paralyzed man not only to stand, but to pick up the mat and go home.

People familiar with John’s Gospel might at this point say: I’ve heard that story, but the details were different. And now we have a mystery. Watch how in this story, from John 5, we find numerous connections:

The Gospel of John recounts how Jesus arrives at the pool, “called in Hebrew [really, Aramaic], Beth-zatha [or, in some manuscripts, Bethesda], which has five porticoes” (John 5:2; archaeologists have found the site of this pool). The pool has healing properties, and some New Testament manuscripts include a verse about an angel stirring the water—look at your own Bible to see if it goes from John 5:3 to 5:5, with verse 4 missing or placed in a footnote. We might think of places of miraculous healings, such as Lourdes, and even rejuvenating spas. At the pool, Jesus meets, among variously physically disabled people, a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years (i.e., a long time). Jesus says to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The statement can, on first reading, sound odd: What else would he want? Yet given that the speaker is Jesus, we can tease out more profound implications. Here are four, and you might think of others.

First, not all people want their physical conditions to change. This is why, for example, some people in the deaf community refuse cochlear implants. They regard themselves as “differently abled” rather than dis-abled. Second, some people find themselves unworthy of care or have determined that others are more deserving. I never liked the saying that goes, “I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.” The saying sets up a terrible game of “things could be worse,” and in doing so, makes less urgent the speaker’s own lack of shoes or warm clothes or a home or safety or health care... Of course things can always be worse, but that is not a good reason for failing to attend to the immediate problem.

Third, and related, some people are reluctant to ask for help, and for various reasons: they do not want to admit weakness or helplessness; they do not want to be a “burden” to others; they fear they will be unable to reciprocate. Fourth, in cases where paralysis of whatever sort is caused by addiction of various types, the individual has to want to address the condition and do whatever is needed to move toward recovery.

The man does not directly answer Jesus’s question. Instead, he explains that he has no one to help him get into the pool, and when he tries to manage on his own, others get ahead of him. (I am wondering if in thirty-eight years he ever asked for help; the man may evoke pity, but I’m getting the sense of a passive/aggressive personality.) Jesus responds, “Stand up, take your mat and walk” (John 5:8). And so he does. The scene should sound familiar: a paralyzed man who needs others to get him to the place of healing; other people who are in the way; the presence of Jesus; a variant on the saying “Take up your bed and walk”...same story, and yet in a different setting, with a different set-up, with a different ending. It’s possible Jesus said the same thing several times, but I have a suspicion that John, knowing this saying from the Synoptic Gospels, used it to tell a different story. Today we would call this “repackaging.”

Perhaps John wanted to offer a teaching on the forgiveness of sins, but not in the context of a healing narrative. Later in the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). There’s more to say about this fellow in John 5, the question of his Sabbath observance, Jesus’s warning to him not to sin again, and his proclamation of the healing, but that must remain for another occasion. It’s time to return to our formerly paralyzed man and his new identity in Mark.

“Take up your pallet and walk”

And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:12)

The miracle confirms Jesus’s ability to forgive sins; it amazes the crowd; it prompts giving thanks to God (by which Mark probably also means Jesus). And it prompts us to reconsider both the former-paralytic and the people whose faith prompted Jesus’s teaching and the miracle. The individual’s identity is completely changed: He was brought to Jesus by caregivers, but he leaves on his own; he came in through the roof, but he walks out the door; the mat held him up, but now he holds the mat. He came in with sins of whatever sort; he is now in the state of having been forgiven. He is no longer paralyzed. But who now is he? What will he do with the gifts he’s been given?

To start, he will necessarily be an evangelist, since every step he takes testifies to Jesus’s power. He will also be a new combination of past and future. When we move from one state to another, whether from paralysis to mobility or sin to forgiveness, we do not leave the past behind. The one who could not walk will treat mobility as something to be appreciated rather than taken for granted. Perhaps he will be more sympathetic to others who also rely on friends, family, servants, or slaves to do for them what they physically cannot do for themselves. Perhaps he will remember this dependence, and so have ongoing concern for the caregivers, that is, the first responders.

Forgiveness wipes away the sin from having an ongoing effect, but forgiveness does not erase the memory of the sin. To rephrase the common saying, to forgive is *not* to forget. It is to remember what we did, or what was done to us. But with forgiveness, that burden of the sin committed and the pain of the sin remembered, no longer has power over us.

Coda

The last time Mark mentions Capernaum is in chapter 9, after Peter has made his confession that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:29), after Peter, James, and John have witnessed Jesus's transfiguration (Mark actually calls this, in Greek, a *metamorphosis*; Mark 9:2), after a healing of a demon-possessed child, and after Jesus, a second time, predicts his death. In 9:33, Mark records that Jesus and disciples had arrived at the house in Capernaum, which had previously served as their base of operations. And Jesus, I suspect with some exasperation, asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Miles of walking, and such fabulous subjects to discuss as miracles, the transfiguration, Jesus's identity, the cross . . . and all these fellows can do is argue?

Had they been arguing about how best to honor the Sabbath, what the greatest commandment might be (there are 613 from which to choose), whether one recites the *Shema* while lying down or after rising up, that would have been great. I'm even okay with arguing about whether sour cream or applesauce is better with potato pancakes (a Hannukah staple). But the disciples "had argued with one another who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). At least Mark notes that they remained silent in the face of Jesus's question, likely because they were too embarrassed to admit what they had been doing. Here is where Jesus teaches them that "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant [*diakonos*, whence the term "deacon"] of all" (9:35). The reference to Capernaum sends me back to the house, with its newly opened roof, and to the caregivers who served the man on the mat—whether as slaves or servants or friends. Mark tells us that Jesus saw their faith, so I see them as active agents. They are doing more than carrying a guy on a bed; they are invested in his healing. They are invested in the healing

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of someone else. They are manifesting their faith by *servicing* the one who could not get to Jesus on his own. The caregivers are the ones from whom the disciples should have learned their lesson. The question they should have been asking is not “Who is the greatest among us?” but “What can we do to help?”

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