



# Signs and Wonders

## Week 1: Pick Up Your Mat

Lori Lampert - 11/06/2022

Signs and wonders. Throughout the Gospels we read of the miracles of Jesus. From the moment of his birth when the angels fill the sky and sing of glory to the resurrection, we are told of the power of Jesus that is above and beyond human understanding. And yet we often try to explain it.

The singing angels were just bright stars glimmering in the night. The loaves and fishes were already among the 5000 and just needed the encouragement to share. The demon possessed man living as an outcast only needed to calm down and be included in order to be of his right mind.

And there may be some truth in our suppositions. A multitude of heavenly angels *would* brighten the sky. Generosity *will* feed the hungry. Compassion will bring in those who have been excluded. Yet, these explanations fall short. They dismiss the underlying miracle of the Gospel, the good news. Let Jesus tell you why he has come in words I read to you often on Sunday mornings—John 3:16 and 17.

**<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

**<sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

This is the miraculous Jesus. For the next three weeks, we are going to look at three of the many times we see in Jesus signs and wonders that take our breath away. In doing so, we will see that he is not a magician using sleight of hand. He is not simply a persuasive speaker arguing for a cause. He did not come to this region of the world to raise an army, to overthrow a government, or to rally the troops.

Jesus came that the world—through him—would be saved, redeemed. Restored. He said that eternal life may begin *now*, when we live here on earth as we will in heaven. He came so that when we breathe our last on this earth, we also breathe our first in heaven. God so loved the world.

We begin today with a story I have lived this past week. Sometimes that will happen with me. I chose this passage of scripture weeks ago, and so it has been rattling around in my mind as I read and considered and pondered how I would present it to you today.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark chose not to begin with a birth narrative of Jesus. He begins instead with the adult Jesus being baptized, tempted, calling his disciples, praying, and then boom: he heals a man with leprosy. All in the first chapter. So it is interesting that he slows down to describe this next encounter. He paints a picture for us so vividly that we can place ourselves in the story. And that's what I am going to ask you to do today.

Look at who is there that day. A group of people have followed Jesus into a home in Capernaum on the northern shore of Lake Galilee. Those seeking to learn have packed this place. The skeptical scribes, religious leaders of the day are there. Four people who are determined to bring their friend before Jesus are there. And of course, so is the man lying helpless on the mat. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, I invite you to be there too. A miracle or two are about to unfold.

Reading from Mark 2:

**<sup>1</sup>When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.**

**<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven."**

**<sup>6</sup>Now some of the scribes were sitting there questioning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup>"Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"**

**<sup>8</sup>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? <sup>9</sup>Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? <sup>10</sup>But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— <sup>11</sup>"I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home." <sup>12</sup>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!"**

I believe at one time or another we will find ourselves as each of these people: We are the people crowded in the room. We are the skeptics. We are the bearers of another. We are the person on the mat.

There are times we are gathered around Jesus, listening to his words, learning of his great love and mercy, and we are content to sit at his feet.

There are times when this attention is so vital to our own spiritual health and growth. Yet, I would invite you to look around the room and notice who is not able to get close to Jesus. Who feels there is no place for them. Who has experienced trying to become part of the crowd only to find themselves excluded. Or maybe a person—who always thought they could be at the foot of Jesus— finds themselves pushed out the front door by others.

And I ask you: how could you make room so that *all* can find their place? How can you enlarge the space so that those you know and love and have yet to meet who have been pushed out the door are welcomed in?

There are times we are called to be the stretcher bearers. Someone we love and care about is paralyzed by fear or illness or addiction. They cannot walk toward Jesus because the way is impossible for them. We are called to find a way. Bringing grace into their lives. Bringing love to them. Picking them up and taking them up the ladder. Determining that their need to learn of Jesus is greater than the risk of appearing foolish, is worth a little roof damage, is worth strategizing how to let them know that God so loves them, God came for them. That God is here—now—in Jesus to receive them. And I ask you: who needs you to see them, to love them enough that you will take the risk and with words and deeds carry them to the feet of Jesus?

Sometimes we are the one on the mat. Emotionally spent, the weight of the circumstances of our life leaves us paralyzed. We are relationally done, betrayed by people we trusted, hurt by someone we thought would protect us. We have been pushed out of a place we always believed was a harbor. We can be physically immobilized by illnesses, disease, accidents, grief, addictions and our bodies will not move without help.

The truth becomes clear: we need a community to help us get to Jesus. If this is you, I pray that you will reach out and ask for help. If this is not you today, if you have been there and recognize this pain, I pray that you will use your experience to reach out to those around you who are even now lying on their

mat. Call, text, email, visit. Don't wait another day. You know what it is like. Use your wisdom and compassion to be as Jesus for them.

And of course in every group of people there are the skeptics. The ones who cannot see what is in front of them. They have a ready answer and an explanation for everything based on what they have already decided.

The Messiah would not be in a home with everyday people. The Messiah would be in the temple in Jerusalem, not a fishing village. This Jesus of Nazareth is nothing but a blasphemer when he declares: Child your sins are forgiven. But even they cannot deny the miracle Jesus brings. Nor can we, for long, when we struggle with belief and open our eye eyes.

Because here is the miracle of the story. Of my story. Of your story. *Child, your sins are forgiven.* The words of Jesus are spoken *before* the man is healed. The reason for the incarnation of God in Jesus is declared. The healing of the paralyzed person on the mat? Of course that, too, is miraculous. Yet, listen again to what Jesus says when the skeptics speak up:

**<sup>10</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—<sup>11</sup>“I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.”**

Jesus didn't come to condemn, he came to *forgive*. Miraculous. The reason to crowd into a room to learn from Jesus. The reason to make the room large enough, to create ample space. The reason to struggle up a ladder bearing a stretcher, to take off a roof and bring someone before Jesus. The miracle that God has come in Jesus Christ and that he has the authority to forgive sins. The miracle that there is nothing you have done or will do that he is not ready to forgive. Jesus has come that you might have abundant life, now and everlasting.

This miracle of forgiveness gives us *all* the ability to take up our mat and go home. To go home changed, but remember where we came from. Go home, testifying about the time you met Jesus. Go home, and be ready—for there is

someone in your life who will need you to be their stretcher bearer. The healing of the paralyzed person began with the restoration of his soul. *This* is the miracle of Jesus.

I lived this story this week. I was scheduled to be in Houston starting Monday for the Jurisdictional Conference of our denomination. I didn't go. With Bill Cantrell's permission, I share why I chose to stay.

When I woke Monday morning, there was a text from Bill on my phone that his beloved wife Jamie was on a ventilator in the ICU at Mercy hospital. She had a massive GI bleed, and had coded multiple times. I drove immediately to Mercy to be with Bill as he faced the worst 48 hours of his life.

While the hours passed, word spread and prayers for Jamie were lifted up for her healing by the many, many people who love her and Bill. Over and over again I heard Bill describe for others what had happened. And in the telling, he continued to express gratitude to the people who responded to his call for help. The Willard Fire Department who came immediately. The EMTs in the ambulance who resuscitated Jamie and brought him with them to the hospital. The excellent team in the ER, and then ICU, who were doing all they could to save Jamie. He spoke of coworkers from the Missouri Highway Patrol, the Gillioz Theatre, The Downtown Church who were reaching out with love, prayer, and support.

And as I sat with him, I saw Jamie in this moment as the person on the mat. She was helpless and desperately needed stretcher bearers to care for her. And they came. They came with skills and abilities. They came with prayer. They came with love. They were willing to do whatever they could to heal her body. But it could not be healed. These fragile human bodies we walk around with do not all get healed in the way we want them to.

Jamie knew this better than most. Jamie was already healed in the way only Jesus Christ can heal. She knew deeply and profoundly of the forgiveness of

sins, she believed in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. She was a person who has been a bearer of others to Jesus.

Jamie had sat at the feet of Jesus. And when the room became too crowded she never hesitated to move over, or give up her place, or build a bigger table where others could learn they, too, were loved by Jesus.

At 3:21 Tuesday afternoon, as Bill and I sat beside Jamie and the doctor pronounced her physical death, I heard in my spirit Jesus say to Jamie "Take up your mat, come home." This is the miracle of Jesus Christ. A miracle Jamie knew had already happened for her. The same miracle that is offered to all of us. May it be so for you.