



Mark 2:1-12

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Rev. Pastor Craig Lindsey

Throughout the world there are spectacular Church Sanctuaries with awesome Chancel Windows. One church I knew had windows designed and built by Tiffany Studios. Another had gold windows behind the preacher, but the people came to recognize this gave the preacher an artificial golden aura, so they closed in the windows, believing if the Preacher has an aura, it better come from God. While I am biased, I cannot envision any more incredible representation of the majesty and power of God. But more than simply a spectacular window, we look through to our vista of the Santa Rita Mountains. I am told that the initial architect for our church was fired because they had no sense of our church's place in the world around us. The next Architect brought a folding chair and for days moved his chair to "Look up Higher, to the High Hills from whence our help comes" to take the best possible advantage of the mountains and clouds of the horizon. When my wife and I came to candidate, it was in the midst of Monsoon Season, and we experienced firsthand that while there can be rain in the desert we view more Rainbows than most places in the world. I came to believe this was this same covenant from God that we had each come through enough pain and suffering, and that would never be again. At last year's Patio Sale, we were blessed to a Double Rainbow, but I believe that is the last I saw?

As part of Confirmation Class, I used to take the kids to Jewish Synagogue, to Catholic Mass and to a Pentecostal Service, so they could better understand and choose how they wanted to practice their faith in God. My thought being, better that they experience other faiths they are curious about through the Church and we discuss these, than for them to experiment on their own without context. Because attending other worship services regularly came at the same time of the year, the Rabbi regularly read the prescription from The Book of Numbers of The Red Heifer. The Red Heifer is a Story of Atonement, that in order to be ritually cleansed and forgiven, a family needed to search for and sacrifice a Red Heifer, without spot or blemish, upon which there had never been placed a Yoke for labor. Being a Heifer, this cow had never born a calf or given milk. The Rabbi who had grown up on a dairy farm described having searched his whole life, and finding such a creature had been as rare as a 4 leaf clover, because as a Sacrifice for Atonement the cow needed to be absolutely blood-red, unmarked, without a white birthmark or scar of any kind. The sacrifice was to be burned by the Priest on an altar to ashes, which as a sign of repentance and atonement the family were to rub themselves from head to foot before bathing clean.

There is contrast here, that the Sacrifice of The Red Heifer is completely human initiated, the Sinner has to find the perfect Heifer, the Sinner has to ensure the Heifer has never birthed, milked, or yoked for labor, the Sinner has to bring the Heifer to the Priest for Sacrifice, the Sinner has to rub themselves with the ashes; whereas in the story of the Flood, the 40 days of cleansing the earth from sin, decision that atonement is complete, the Covenant of the Rainbow in the clouds, all come from God. Further that the Red Heifer is about individual atonement and redemption, much like Yom Kippur; whereas the Rainbow is not only for all the people of the world, but for all Creation. Related to the sacrifice of the Red Heifer, when the sinner was cleansed, the Priest who had offered the Sacrifice took the sins upon themselves,

which to me seemed indicative of Jesus atonement on the Cross. Mentioning Yom Kippur, that Annual Day of Atonement in late September, it is required that to be forgiven first you had to find the person you had offended and receive their forgiveness. If they were not prepared to forgive, you had an entire year to wait for forgiveness to again be available.

Where many of us had never before heard the story of the Red Heifer, our reading from the Gospel is a familiar one for most of us from Sunday School. Jesus was at his home in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. As he taught and healed people, 4 friends came carrying their paralytic friend. In a time before the Social Distancing of COVID19, the house was so filled with people, the four could not enter with their friend. How delightful to be telling this story in Arizona, where our homes also are stucco with a flat roof much as those in Israel, which for the years we lived in 3 story frame houses, or suburban tract aluminum-sided Ranch houses made less sense! The implicit setting of this story, is that the friends cared so much about the healing of their friend, they start ripping a hole through the roof to lower their friend 's pallet down until he is right under the nose of Jesus, where they hope he has to take notice.

But as with last Sunday, there is far more going on spiritually beneath the surface. Anytime in the Bible we have reference to Water, we need to remember the Genesis waters of Chaos, Noah and the Flood, Moses and the Red Sea. Anytime there is reference to 12 we look with our faith for the Tribes of Israel and for the Disciples. Anytime there is a ripping open of the firmament above our heads, we look in faith for God's Affirmation of Jesus Baptism, and at the Transfiguration proclaiming "This is my Beloved Son." Imagine the noise and debris falling down on the people, as these four ripped open the roof above their heads and began lowering their friend down through the firmament to Jesus!?

While perhaps few of us have been lowered on a pallet through the roof of a House during Worship; we probably can all identify with feeling VULNERABLE! The point of the young man being lowered, is that he is completely helpless. Paralyzed from the Neck Down; having been carried through town by his friends; brought up to this Rooftop as they began ripping open the roof, tying his pallet to four ropes and lowering him down. Being Vulnerable is a helpless feeling, of also being on display for the world, lowered down so that Jesus has got to take notice and stop what he was doing to pay attention. There are times when we wish no one would notice us; there are also times when we pray to GOD that God would notice our needs and afflictions. In this entire story, the young man does not even have opportunity to speak.

This is one of the few occurrences in the Bible, where FORGIVENESS comes not because of the faith of the afflicted, but Jesus affirms the faith of their friends. And yet, that is only the first part of this story of forgiveness and healing, because the Scribes complained in their hearts that Jesus had committed blasphemy by Jesus saying "Your sins are forgiven" because only God could forgive sins. FORGIVENESS is the central issue here. Forgiveness is the means of Healing. Forgiveness according to the Scribes belongs to God. Forgiveness is more than simply saying "I am sorry" or "It does not matter to me" or acceptance. FORGIVENESS is an intentional decision, that our relationship is of greater value than the harm inflicted.

There are particular stories with which we have special connection. In 1972, when I was not yet 14, this was the first passage I ever preached a sermon on. In a nutshell, the point of this story is Jesus was before a crowd in his family's house preaching; when 4 friends of a paralyzed man interrupt Jesus that he would care; Jesus forgives the man's sins; the Scribes then become indignant that Jesus committed blasphemy because No One can forgive Sins except God; to which Jesus questions whether it is easier to Forgive Sins or Heal People?

It was Youth Fellowship Sunday, and as an 7<sup>th</sup> Grader I stood in the Pulpit and read this passage from the Gospel of Mark. Just as I finished, 4 friends who were planted in the back-rows, began to rant and complain loudly about how their friend needed a job because his family was sick, yet all we could do was read some story about a hole in the roof from 2000 years ago! SO I stopped what I had been saying and listened and responded, because Jesus had stopped his preaching, a local business owner offered this young man a job, especially on the references of the Church. At which point, there was another “pre-arranged complainant” who much like the Scribes stood up and said “Can we not get back to doing Church, my Mom has a roast in the Oven and church has got to get over with for my Dad to watch his Game.”

However, while we thought we had dramatized this story, by making the Paralytic an Unemployed Man, and the Scribes the Women; we were 13 year old 7<sup>th</sup> Graders, and our church was outside Detroit in the early 1970s... What we as kids had not realized or remembered was that a few years before the leader of the Black Panthers had stood up during worship, and taken over the Pulpit during worship to read the Black Manifesto and begin a Sit-in at the Presbyterian Church. Charlie Thomas, as we had come to know this Black Panther, was now seated in the second row and happened to be beside the young woman who had taken the role of the Scribes; and the Trustees of the Church, a group of seven men in Business Suits had stepped up behind the 5 protestors in the back prepared to put them back in their seats. Until they realized these were acting out the Gospel.

As a pastor, you wish you could plan a moment like that in a church, where the Gospel exists in the Word, in what you are trying to communicate and also on a whole different reality, but that morning was completely in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

And immediately Jesus responded with a question: “Which is easier, to say ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Rise, take up your pallet and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” – he said to the paralytic – “I say to you, Rise, take up your pallet and go home.” And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all. So that they all glorified God saying “We never saw anything like this!”