



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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My Favorite Bible Friends

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Full disclosure: I cannot name a favorite verse or book or character from the Bible.

And yet, we launched this series as a way to invite you to think through scripture, what you learned and how you learned, and rediscover the vast array of truths from comical and tragic characters, humor and inspiration, far-fetched stories, and all the divine-human encounters.

We stand in a long line of people who dreamed dreams, allowed God to work through them, and who bequeathed us promises for us to nurture and hand forward.

Any text that vies for the priority of *favorite* usually results from serious wrestling matches before teaching or preaching as I seek to understand it, myself, and my relationship with God. A week later, I am on to the next passage and a new favorite emerges.

Today's story drew my attention as we emerge from a pandemic, reflect on the miracles we've experienced together, and face the work ahead.

Mark's gospel was composed sometime between 64 and 72 of the Common Era during the brutal violence known as "the Jewish War." In the thirty to forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Roman authorities had slaughtered thousands and proceeded to destroy the Jerusalem Temple.

Into this fragile time the author of Mark's gospel speaks to those who fear for their lives reminding them Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news."

The Gospel of Mark opens with the plea for listeners to persist in their faith.

Quickly, the story unfolds proving Jesus is God 's son by what he says and does.

News of his divine power goes virial. Since he became a magnet for crowds – those anxious for life and those threatened by him – he lingered in the countryside.

Before I read what comes next, please pray with me.

Dear God, we come to these ancient words with the same thirst for your truth, for grace, and for healing as those who heard of Jesus. Quiet the noise around us. Send your spirit among us, so that as we hear, we feel the anticipation of the crowd, and find our lives lifted by his presence. May he restore our lives. Amen.

Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.

² 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.

³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

⁴ 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.

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

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

⁸ 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?”

⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—

¹¹ “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.”

¹² 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!”

‘Tis the season of commencement addresses, those talks to inspire graduates on the threshold of “adulting.” Adulting is a made-up verb to include launching careers, flying the nest for good, accepting responsibility, and as most parents hope, becoming financially independent.

More often commencement addresses speak to those of us mired in the daily slog of adulting, for whom the novelty has worn off and who need a new spark of light.

Several years ago, retired Admiral William McRaven’s speech at the University of Texas raced through social media with ten million views.

Inspired by the university’s slogan “what starts here changes the world,” he offered ten principles based upon his thirty-seven-year career as a Navy SEAL.

His first piece of advice, “make your bed,” became the title of his later book *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life and Maybe the World*.

Quite simply, make your bed, first thing in the morning, to set the stage for everything else you do that day. I quote

McRaven, “If you cannot do little things right, you cannot do big things right.”¹

He offers more about the mundane practice of making a bed before launching into the other disciplines that will shape the individual and collective character of women and men who will face the toughest challenges in combat.

The drills become messy, exhausting, stressful, pushing them to the limits of human capacity in every aspect. There is no room for ego or glamour or individual best.

Daily discipline and daily pursuit of difficult trials build self-confidence and cements the team’s confidence to pursue the impossible.

It all starts with, make your bed.

Returning to our scripture passage, perhaps “some people” and the four who carried their friend to Jesus, acted as a result of what had been ingrained in them by their daily routines.

I am not suggesting they made their beds; I refer to the ritual of daily prayers to affirm God as sovereign, particularly amidst Roman occupation.

¹ William H. McRaven, *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life...and Maybe the World*, (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017) p. 111.

Jewish custom prescribed reciting prayers, several times a day, to put into their muscle memory belief in God above all else. They are to write in their hearts; God has remained faithful throughout tragedies, and they can rely upon God, alone.

In my mind's eye, at this house in Capernaum, I imagine a crush of people surrounding Jesus. Curiosity seekers. Skeptics. Anyone who had heard of Jesus' remarkable capacity to heal and teach pressed forward.

Undaunted by the barriers of people and physical surrounds, these friends scale the building, claw through a roof, and lower their comrade, mat and all, to Jesus.

Jesus, impressed with the faith of these friends, speaks to the paralyzed man, forgives his sins, and tells him to take us his mat, and walk.

This is such a rich story of layered intrigue, but let's just focus on the simple.

When did the miracle happen? When Jesus spoke to the paralyzed man. When he got up and carried his mat out of the house. Or earlier?

Where did this miracle begin? At the obstacle the friends encountered prompting them to destroy the roof so they could reach him? Or someplace else?

Who caused the miracle?

Do you wonder how many times these friends tried to find healing? How often had they carried their friend somewhere, to someone, only to be disappointed?

And, yet they did not give up on him or the vision of a full life they all could enjoy.

Is it possible the miracle started that morning and every morning those friends turned their lives to God in prayer?

This miracle counted on “some people,” the nameless, ordinary people, to defy what is expected or thought to be insurmountable and pursue a better life.

Mark tells us, “All were amazed” when this man carried his mat out of the house. Even though the gospel races to another story, imagine the ripple effect of witnesses who tell of this miracle.

Imagine those four friends, who encountered God, in the flesh, who answered their prayers, what they might do next.

I’ll close with a story from the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD, where incoming cadets also learn to make their beds.

Tradition began long ago at the end of the academic year for the freshman class of cadets to scale the Herndon Monument on campus, a twenty-one-foot obelisk, and

replace a plebe's hat, called a dixie-cup, with a midshipman's cap.

To make the task more interesting, tradition demands slathering the obelisk with a combination of water and grease or lard.

This year, after 3½ hours of brute strength and no progress, a cannon blasted over the yard, letting everyone know this class would vie for the slowest time in history.

I'll not repeat from our pulpit some of the cadet's comments but suffice it to say these young adults, covered in sweat, mud, and grass, voiced their exhaustion.

In the final hour, the class hugged tightly together around the gray granite, forming a more stable base. In the end, a skinny plebe scrambled atop the fleshy pyramid to complete the task.

He threw a fist in the air. "We are the covid class. We've beat covid! We beat Herndon! And we are plebes no more!"

When back on solid ground he finished with "I just put it up there by the grace of God and some good luck."²

²Danielle Ohl, "Naval Academy Class of 2024 records one of slowest Herndon Monument climbs in history," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/naval-academy-plebes-climb/2021/05/23/675b88c4-bbce-11eb-b26e-53663e6be6ff_story.html

Sometimes you make a mess in life, push yourself to the limit, rely upon others, and then the grace of God meets you.

The miracle of new life starts in the wee hours of the dawn, by beginning each day, committing ourselves first and foremost to God.

Scripture teems with stories of magnificent reversals. The least likely shepherd becomes king. A barren woman gives birth. The second son inherits the blessing. Everyone loves winner and all the attendant glamor.

And scripture is filled with common people who rely upon God to make their way. They face the messy, sweaty difficulty of trudging through deserts, they get lost, they sleep in makeshift shelters, they share. They argue. They fall apart. And they try again.

It does not matter if they finish first or last, but that they run the race, each and every day. What matters is to whom they devote their lives – God.

These are my favorite friends in scripture. They represent what I would like to be to you, who I want us to be for one another, within this congregation and the wider community. People are counting on us. God is counting on us.

We experienced the tragedy of COVID individually and collectively. And we all participated in the miracle by praying for and receiving vaccines.

We continue to experience the tragedies of racial injustices, gun violence, financial hardship, and we can all participate in bringing about healing. God is counting on us.

We are called to be people who persevere with and for one another, confident what we do will be met by the one who brings us into the fullness of life we so desperately seek. May it be so, my friends.

Seamus Heaney (1939–2013)

Miracle

Not the one who takes up his bed and walks
But the ones who have known him all along
And carry him in —

Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deep locked
In their backs, the stretcher handles
Slippery with sweat. And no let up

Until he's strapped on tight, made tiltable
and raised to the tiled roof, then lowered for healing.
Be mindful of them as they stand and wait

For the burn of the paid out ropes to cool,
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity
To pass, those who had known him all along.³

³ Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org