

## “Stand Up”

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First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: John 5:9-18**  
**Old Testament lesson: Psalm 40:1-5**

Ever since Christmas, we've been journeying alongside Jesus through the Gospel According to John. Did you notice that? I've been getting our sermon texts from something called the Narrative Lectionary, which is walking us step by step through John, like a story.

The Narrative Lectionary is new. It's something many pastors of all denomination are trying. Here at First Presbyterian, we're going to continue journeying through John alongside Jesus all the way to Easter – all the way to the cross. And then we'll see where God leads us from there.

In our New Testament lesson for today, Jesus has just cured the paralyzed man who had been lying by a pool of healing waters for years and never once did he make it in to get cured – if that was even possible. Of course, apart from God, it wasn't. But as we've seen in recent weeks, with God, the impossible is made possible.

Today, we are going to look at how it is possible that in all the difficulties of life, God is at work to **overcome the impossible**. To see how God operates in the world we need to look at two things: God and the world. After the paralyzed man is cured by Jesus (who represents God), John tells us that “the Jews” (quote, unquote, who represent the world) take great interest in what Jesus is up to.

Now, when John refers to “the Jews,” he's really talking about all societal leaders in general and not Jewish people in particular, and certainly not people of Jewish faith today. That's because in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, the religious leaders were the predominant authority over society. They controlled all the traditions and customs that governed and guided every aspect of life. Unlike today, there was no distinction between religious life and your life in society, your social life.

We see this sense of control and domination when the religious leaders respond to Jesus and the paralyzed man: “It is the Sabbath,” they say to the man. “It is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” Carrying your mat was considered work, and doing work on the Sabbath flew in the face of everything that held society together at that time. It flew in the face of the Torah – the Hebrew Bible – which told people how to rightly live before God and alongside one another.

This opposition between the religious leaders of that time and what Jesus teaches arises in what is lifted up by society as all-important.

Despite what Jesus teaches about standing alongside one another, the Sabbath – along with circumcision and taboos against pork and other foods – were actually used to alienate certain people and elevate others, even by the early Christians.

And we still do that today. Just like the religious leaders used the Sabbath against Jesus, we take what God gives for the benefit of all and we use it against one another. We have everything we need to take a stand against suffering in this world – whether it's from lack of food or some other physical need, or an emotional need such as love, or a spiritual need such as deepening our faith.

Think about it, when we are faced with great physical needs, God sends us the Spirit of love to overcome them, through our sharing what we have with those in need. When we are faced with great emotional need, we have our faith to carry us through. And when our faith is lacking, we have other Christians to hold onto the faith and lift us up on our behalf. And the best part about it is, when we can no longer see God at work in the world, that's when God comes looking for us.

The paralyzed man saw no way to be healed – no one to turn to – until, as John says, “Jesus saw him lying there and ... said to him, “Do you want to be made well?.....stand up, take your mat, and walk.” Jesus takes a stand for this man when the man would not or could not take a stand for himself. And so it is; it's always God searching for us, first and foremost.

One day the Assembly of God Church in Bushnell, Florida, received a letter from American Family Publishers. It announced that God, of Bushnell, Florida, had been chosen as a finalist for the \$11 million top prize in the American Family Publishers' Sweepstakes. Here is what the letter said: “God, we've been searching for you! What an incredible fortune this would be for you, God! Could you imagine the looks you'd get from your neighbors! But don't just sit there, God,” ... now that we at American Family Publishers' sweepstakes, have found you.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, a computer error.

But there's a deeper error here than just God's name ending up in a form letter. Biblically, the story of human history is not the story of our search for God, but of God's search for us. It's true for the paralyzed man, and it's true for us here today. God reaches out to us, to heal us.

We see this in how the Gospel of John takes an amazing-yet-relatively-simple healing miracle and expands it to embrace all suffering the world over. Did you notice that? The connection between this one man's suffering and all suffering in the world? It's subtle, but notice the follow-up response of the religious leaders, after they learn Jesus healed on the Sabbath. John tells us (quote), “For this reason, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him...,” to send Jesus to the

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Reuters Limited. *Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 3.

cross, the cross of our salvation. Jesus happens by a paralyzed man, sets aside social and political power struggles to heal him, and in that, Jesus is headed to the cross. The plot to crucify him has begun. That's all it takes to be hated by the world; step outside social norms to help someone else. That's why in John we've got the healing of paralysis right next to the healing of the world, the healing of sin and our separation from God.

And that makes sense. Don't our sins tend to paralyze us in moving forward – addictions that stunt our growth socially, spiritually and emotionally; lies and deception that only get in our way; self-righteous, judgmental attitudes that prevent us from coming alongside others.

And here, Jesus is willing to face the cross in order to overcome all this, as evidenced in the healing of one paralyzed man. Jesus knows that in standing up for the paralyzed man, he is standing up for God. "My Father is still working, and I also am working." In other words, says Jesus, I'm going to **take a stand for God**.

God does not withhold himself from those who are suffering or in need or facing impossible challenges. Of all the suffering in this world, 99.9% of it exists because of our stubborn, misguided ways – waging war to win the peace, economic systems that leave millions needlessly starving the world over, arguments and positioning that result in everything from domestic violence, to lovers' quarrels, to shopping-mall shootings.

All this could be overcome if instead of taking a stand for ourselves, we would join Jesus in taking a stand for God. Jesus stands up for God, and in his doing so, we are called to **stand up for Jesus**. That's how God operates in the world, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ working in us and through us.

We are all here today because, just like the leaders of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, we have taken great interest in what Jesus is up to. They saw how Jesus threatened the security of their way of living, and they plotted to kill him. They sought to wipe Jesus from the face of the earth, from the pages of history.

Well friends, that threat against Jesus stands today! And it's up to us, when faced with challenges to our own sense of security, to take a stand for Jesus. This is true when it comes to world affairs and it's true closer to home, in our communities, in our families, among our friends, and among those we meet at school or in our workplaces. Take a stand for Jesus.

Jesus heals the paralyzed man despite what it costs him personally. And in doing so, Jesus challenges each and every one of us to take a look at the cost of our actions and inactions. When we take a stand for ourselves, when you find yourself sometime this week taking a stand, ask yourself, what is the cost, to others.

Who are you really standing up for? Would Jesus be standing beside you – beside me? Or if we really looked for him, would we find Jesus standing up for the other person, standing alongside them and looking back at us – looking back at you or me? Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

God, today we come to you on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. They do not have the strength to pray, or the words to communicate the hurting in their souls.

We know that you see us, inside and out, and that you are not unfamiliar with our sorrow. Reach out to these hurting ones, O Lord, and let them know again that you are real, you are ever-present, and your heart breaks for them.

We know that you can satisfy our longings and heal our hurts, so we ask boldly that you would.

Thank you for hearing this prayer on behalf of our brothers and sisters.

We trust you with our lives, know that you would and have given your life for us.

Thank you the gift of Jesus Christ, the Spirit that he sends, and for the words that he has given to us.

We thank you, especially in this moment, for the words of the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**