

Unique Encounters with God

Mark 2:2-5

Pastor Tim Bohlke

I felt my heart starting to race just as that song continued; that is the power of the words and the music as it really invites us in to experience that in a different way. Several years ago I was the Director of Campus Life Youth for Christ and we were taking a couple of busloads of teenagers out to Colorado for our annual ski trip. That trip always had a story or several stories with it, most of them good. This particular year there were several guys from one of the high schools in town that I was working with that were going, guys that I was really tied into. I developed a relationship playing basketball and doing some different things over the months but these guys had hard stories, difficult journeys, tough family situations and no exposure to church at all. The vast majority of them had never been to church, no experience or sense of God's great love for them. It was just all new and so I was really conscious of that going into this trip. And for this trip, because it was so big, we hired a speaker to come in because I felt like they needed another voice, another perspective to talk about and present and open this up to them a little bit.

The second night a friend of mine from Denver, he got up in front of the group and said, "You know, I just feel led right now to sing a song for you guys." And he set that up and proceeded to start doing that. Now you've got to understand: for me I'm seeing this and feeling this through the world of these guys, right? And I'm dying inside because, let's face it; this guy was a much better speaker than he was a singer! (laughter) And I was like, "Oh boy, they're already a littler weirded out by this journey and I'm wrestling with it and thinking through it and looking at it through their eyes and this guy begins to sing *Amazing Grace*. He got through the first verse, and into the second something started to happen. These guys started to break and emotion started to flow and one by one it just kind of changed the whole night. And you know what? The speaker that night didn't need to speak. We had a whole change; we had a unique encounter with God—those guys did and we as leaders did—that we'll never forget. In fact I was with one of these guys last week at an event we were doing—twenty businessmen out in Colorado. He flew in to join us—twenty years later—from that event. The man is still walking with God, still chasing God, still pursuing God and will point to that night as a pivotal moment in his life, where his life started to turn. Amazing! Amazing grace! And how I can best describe to you what happened was really through the words of that song that night, "*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved someone (that's messed up) like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.*" And those teenagers that night began to see for the first time—to see and experience God. That's what happened. And that's kind of my prayer as I sit here and process and think of what God could do here in these next few minutes.

You know the Bible is the inspired Word of God and it embodies the very foundation of our faith. But it's also a book of great, incredible stories. Amazing stories of God pursuing people, of God pursuing us, and of people who have come to a place in their lives of great success or personal failure, of struggle and heartache, that have come to a point in their lives where they've got to commit their lives to something bigger. They are seeking something bigger than themselves. And so it's a book of stories of people seeking God in unique ways, in powerful ways, in life-changing ways. My favorite is hidden in three small verses in Mark 2. And so, if you've got a Bible and you want to open it to that, Mark 2, verses 2-5, I just want to read that for you. It's an amazing encounter.

And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith [...which is awesome! It wasn't just one, but seeing a group of men's faith...] said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And a few verses later in verse 11 he says, "Rise, take up your pallet and go home." (*NASB, Mark 2:2-5, 11)

Now, that's a powerful encounter! Don't miss the heart of the story: Jesus is in their town and the word is getting out on this guy. People who had come in contact, encountered Him are being changed. Their stories, their lives, their emotions, their physical bodies, they're being changed. *The Man* is in town and there is such a crowd around Him and packed in where He's teaching in that house and no one can get in or out and you've got to imagine the streets and the community around Him and where he was, it had to be abuzz; people had to be talking. Much like if we were downtown and a crowd was gathering and there was excitement and people were looking and you'd probably head over there to see what was going on, right? There's a lot of action probably around Him and around the house and in the streets. And on the scene come four guys carrying their buddy, on mission to get this man to the foot of Jesus—carrying their friend who couldn't get there himself—willing to do whatever it takes to get their friend to the foot of Christ and they do, right? They fight the crowds; they get up on the roof; somehow they dig a hole in the roof; they get what they need to do to lower their friend to the foot of Jesus, in the hope that that could change his life.

A few things about these guys that I want to mention: they are dreamers, right? These guys are dreamers! Life has a way sometimes of knocking our dreams down a little bit. Sometimes things just happen; we get busy; the pace gets fast. Disappointments build up and cause us to step away from our dreams and, specifically, our dream of really having a life-changing encounter with Christ. Sometimes we settle. These guys hadn't done that. They were dreamers but they were much more than dreamers. They were risk-takers. They stepped out; they made a move towards Christ. And they put their reputations—I'd say their pride certainly—on the line, in terms of how they did it to make it happen. Because they had an unyielding, unwavering commitment that said, "If we could just get our friend to the foot of Christ, if we could just get our friend to the foot of Jesus, that encounter could change everything! And they believed that, obviously, with their whole heart.

You could make a case that these guys were reckless in their pursuit, couldn't you? I mean, have you ever thought about this story in the sense of whose house this was? I mean, whose house was this? Was this one of theirs...or somebody else's...or does it matter? I mean, they crawled up and took the roof off...and dug a hole; I mean, you know, whose house was it? These guys were recklessly pursuing God and recklessly pursuing that encounter. For sure they were relentless. You could say that they were relentless in their pursuit of an encounter with Christ. Pushing through any obstacle, not content to stay, absolutely resolved to the fact that staying at home—settling—not taking a step towards Christ, was not an option. They had to move! They had to go to where Jesus was. They were relentless in their pursuit of Christ.

It begs the question for you and me this morning: What does that look like for us? What does that look like to pursue God with the hope and the dream that that encounter can change everything? What does it look like to have a relentless, ongoing, committed pursuit of passion for Christ, that just is not affected by the obstacles in front of us.

One last thing about these guys is: they didn't do this alone. They did this short journey *together*. You had to think, as they were crawling up on the roof and pulling their friend up and starting to dig, that one or two of them was thinking, "What are we doing?" Right? I mean you had to think of it. But probably the other guys would keep digging, "Bro, I mean, keep digging! We gotta get our friend down there; something could happen here." And how about the guy who's being lowered down to the crowd and to Jesus? Can you think of a more intensely lonely moment than that, at that moment? Is there ever a more vulnerable, lonely moment than that as they lower him down in front of everybody? So there were intense individual moments on this journey but they also did it together and, as they lowered him to the foot of Jesus in the hope that things could change, you know what? They did! Things did change; his life was rocked! And so was theirs! Can you image those four guys up on the roof trying to catch a peek of what was going on down there and, when they see him pick up his pallet and walk out of there, what that must have been like? Oh my gosh! It would have been amazing! I mean, what a moment for all those guys—a life changing moment, an encounter with Christ! Lord, help us to do that. Pray with me.

Help us to have that kind of anticipation, that kind of hope, Lord, that an encounter with You can change things. In these next few minutes we have a chance to worship again and we have a chance to enter communion in a different way, to share that together, to do that together. Help us to do that with an intensity and a relentlessness that won't change. Help us to remember, Lord, what You've done for us and how You've uniquely met each of us in our own stories. Re-instill in us a passion, the dream, the hope, the belief that not only an encounter with You is possible, but it can be life-changing for us. Thank you for the reminder in Proverbs 8 that those who diligently seek You, will find You. Help us to diligently, hopefully, relentlessly seek You with all we've got, not only in these next minutes but in the moments, the day to day moments, in the weeks and months ahead of us. Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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