

## Ending at the Beginning

Mark 3:1-6

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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You ever had to do something hard? Maybe even, painful? Sure you have. We all have. Some people are better at it than others. Some folks just have more courage! You know what makes “it,” whatever “it” is, hard? It’s hard because in some way it’s something we don’t want to do. The reason we don’t might be pain, or some level of revulsion – like having to go to some social thing and deal with people you really can’t stand. Which is worse if it’s *family*. How ‘bout those reunions? Or talk about pain – having to go to any doctor who uses any kind of tool whose name ends in “scope.” That last comes under the heading of things you *know* you have to do. How many of you remember breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend or even a fiancé because you knew it was for your own good? You *really* didn’t want to have that conversation! But you cranked up your courage, and you went and did it. And it *was* all for the good.

Today’s scripture is all about how Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, did that hard thing, that thing he knew was going to be painful; and in his case, the most painful thing that ever happened to anybody, anywhere, *ever*. But it was the thing that he needed to do, and that *we* needed him to do: to provide the ending that God wanted.

You remember last week, we talked about Jesus healing the paralytic, how everyone around, even the *scribes*, were deliriously happy, praising God lustily when the miracle was complete. Things have changed. When we get to Chapter 3 of Mark, we see some “development” in his relationships with the power brokers. Some very *negative* development. Oh, not in the *absolute* sense; just in the eyes of the people who held all the *earthly* power. Since the healing of the paralytic, Jesus has called taxpayers

and other sinners to follow him, and he even brought them to the dinner table! He encouraged his disciples to avoid fasting, apparently; and he even appeared to encourage them to pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath, a clear violation.

And then we come to our verses for today. You see the power brokers giving him all kinds of “warnings,” so to speak, all along up to this point; but what does Jesus do? He goes into the synagogue *on the Sabbath*, with full knowledge that something like this is bound to happen. The “like this” I mean is the request to do some healing; everywhere Jesus went, he was mobbed by people looking to be healed or to have someone healed. Yeah, he *knew* that a hard choice was coming. What do *you* think he was thinking and feeling?

Let's talk about that. Think about when you've been faced with making that choice, the one you knew you had to make but you knew was going to be hard. What were you considering? Likely, you were thinking about what would be best for you, or best for everyone concerned, including you. Almost nobody makes decisions purely based on how it'll all play out for other folks. If you're making the decision, you have an interest. Even soldiers who make the ultimate sacrifice have an interest in this thing they die for: they're proud to be Americans, and they know on some level that what they do, they do for this country that they love so much. It takes courage on their part to make that sacrifice – which is why they are so honored, because in addition to their sacrifice we pay homage to their courage.

No one has ever had the courage of our Lord Jesus. Remember, he was fully man, just as you and I, are in every respect. That meant he felt pain the same way we

do – exactly the same way. But he was also fully God – which meant he could have simply avoided the whole thing. And so we come to this point today, this hard choice that Jesus had to make.

Well now, wait, wait! You're probably thinking, "This is really early! Didn't he make the choice at the end, when he could have escaped it all? Like in the Garden of Gethsemane?" No. Listen to the last verse of our Scripture:

"The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

You know what the verse right *before that* says? "He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." It's stunning that these supposed religious "leaders" conspired *immediately, IN RESPONSE TO*, this powerful, love-filled miracle they'd just seen.

"Love-filled?" Yeah, it sure was. Jesus knew that as he did this healing at the beginning of his ministry, as he told the man to "Stretch out your hand," he was stretching himself out, measuring himself for that cross that was coming at the end. As Mark depicts it, this is the moment when *Jesus' ending was beginning*. His life's ending was beginning here at the beginning of his ministry. His ministry's ending would be the beginning of our salvation, and our being with God forever.

Some of you might say, "Isn't *that* kind of a 'stretch' itself? That assumes a lot, doesn't it?" No – it's all right there in Scripture, as plain as it can be. Jesus knew what was in their hearts; Jesus always knows what's in our hearts. You heard it back there in

chapter 2, with the paralytic's healing. You hear it here. The "anger" he felt as he looked around was a little deeper than our translations tell you. One other possible meaning of the word is "agitation of the soul"; it also can refer to any deep, painful emotion, especially one that evokes a strong reaction. Yes, Jesus was angered at their "hardness of heart." He was also deeply grieved, because you know how he loved people! – and yet these Pharisees and scribes were so far away from God. And there might also have been, and I think there was, a very deep fear. Jesus WAS just as human as we are; and if you knew the ending that was coming, you'd have a deep, almost violent fear that tried to drive you *away from* that ending.

But he still said, "Stretch out your hand." He said it, knowing that this hurting one would surely do it. And knowing that the countdown to his own end began as soon as the man with the leprosy reached back. He did the healing, knowing that the clock started ticking at the words, "Stretch out your hand!"

You know what? Our Lord is still saying those words, even now. He's still calling for us to stretch out our hands, so he can take us by the hand, and lead us, *even though* we don't want to sacrifice, don't want to offer ourselves up in even a small fashion, even though we do everything we can to avoid pain, or even a little hard exercise in the Spirit!

So do we reach back, and take the hand? If we do, we begin *our* end, too. Jesus knew the outcome of his life here on earth – of that, there can be no doubt. If we stretch out our hands to the Lord, we'll be healed in more than just our hands! – and we'll know our outcome, our "ending," just like Jesus did. Except our ending isn't like his – he took care of all the pain for us. Our ending is, really, another beginning: the beginning of

eternal life with God. When you consider what Jesus did, and how he planned it all along, and how he made sure it was gonna happen – well, that just proves that, beginning or end, we are truly loved. Make sure you think of that, as you make your journey through Lent.