

STRAIGHTENED BACKS AND REKINDLED DREAMS

Text: Luke 13:10-17.

Dear Friends, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.
My friends, I believe it is accurate to state the fact that we live in a world, which can, all too easily, be shaken.

That's the first thing we need to see in our text, for today, from Luke's gospel.

I don't think there is a person among us who hasn't experienced a "shaking" at some point in our lives, and we know this fact to be true...no one seems immune to this reality.

Well, my friends, we live in a world that can be all too easily shaken – whether through ill health, chronic physical problems, financial meltdowns, terrorism, all kinds of public disasters, as well as an endless array of personal tragedies, all things that can happen, at any time, to you, or those you love – automobile accidents, sickness, loss of a job, breakup of a marriage, and even random acts of violence.

Who could have ever predicted what the arrival of something called COVID-19 would mean for our personal lives, our world of work and leisure, as well as adversely impacting the economy of the entire world?

It doesn't take long for us to discover that this is a cruel world...

And, the truly disturbing thing, is, that some of the most important events in life, are beyond our control.

We like to think we are in control of our lives, and when we're young, it may seem that way. But, as life goes on, we learn that control is an illusion.

Life happens...sometimes you draw the short straw, and there is nothing you can do about it. You may, simply, be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

What is it like to live without hope?

What is it like, to, finally, decide, that your dreams are beyond your abilities to ever reach them, and, then, to resign yourself to living on, without any prospect that things will ever get any better?

The closest thing I could find, to an illustration of a person totally without hope, comes from a book by Dr. David Jeremiah, entitled, **THE POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT**.

Dr. Jeremiah tells about an old Alfred Hitchcock movie, which featured the story of an evil woman who had been jailed for committing a murder.

The woman soon realizes that her only chance for escape, is to befriend the old man, who serves as the prison undertaker, because he is the only inmate who is, ever, allowed outside the prison walls.

And, so, after much bribing, and begging, the woman finally convinces the old man to help her escape.

He tells her, that next time she hears the bell toll to announce a death in the prison, she should slip down to the prison mortuary, and hide in the coffin, along with the dead body.

He would, then, take the coffin out the next morning, and bury it, in a shallow grave.

And, then, when no one was looking, he would slip back out, and dig up the woman, and release her.

It would be the perfect escape plan.

And, to be certain, everything went according to their scheme...

On the night the woman heard the death bell, she slipped down to the mortuary, and hid in the, waiting coffin, with the dead body.

The coffin was, then, transported outside the prison walls, and buried.

The woman waited hopefully, anxiously, but no one came to dig her up.

Finally, she decided to light a match, and look around her.

It was then, she discovered, that the dead body, lying beneath her, was that of the old undertaker.

And, that, my friends, I believe to be an apt illustration of complete hopelessness.

As that woman, despite her planning and scheming, ended up in a worse fate than a life of imprisonment – she came, quickly to realize, that she had, in actuality, engineered her own death and burial -- there was no way out of her situation, and, no one would likely ever know what happened...

Have you ever found yourself in a situation, that represents to you, nothing but complete hopelessness -- even utter futility?

If you've ever been there, as I have, then, you know how dark things look, and how tempting it is, to simply surrender to your circumstances...

But I want to encourage all, who find life to be hopeless, that there is another option for you...

No, you won't be able to dig yourself out of a grave, but this option will assist you, in just about every other situation in life...

The writer of Hebrews says, in chapter 12 and verse 28, that, although we live in this shakable world, as Christian believers, we are part of an *"unshakable kingdom."*

And when things are looking bad in this shakable world, it is time to look to Jesus, and His unshakable kingdom!

Because when you find yourself on "shaky ground," you instinctively begin looking for a stable place on which to stand.

And, that place is always in Jesus and His unshakable kingdom!

That's what happened to a woman a long time ago – she was in trouble, and she looked to Jesus...

Jesus is a hope giver.

Jesus is a dream restorer.

Jesus takes people who are just barely hanging on with white knuckles and clenched teeth and gives them a new, and fresh beginning.

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues one Sabbath day, and a woman was there, who had been crippled for eighteen years.

She was bent over, and could not straighten up.

Whenever I read this story, about the woman who was bent over, I, always, think of a man from my home town.

His name was Wally Nordgaard.

Wally injured his back many years earlier – I think it was a sports injury – and, subsequently, was forced to walk bent over, for the duration of his life.

If he was sitting behind his desk as an administrator at the North Dakota State College of Science in Wahpeton, ND, you'd have thought he was as "normal" as the rest of us -- and he was -- until he left that chair...

I think, at that time in history, everybody knew who Mr. Nordgaard was – and everyone also knew that he was well liked, and he liked others as well...

As long as I knew of him, Mr. Nordgaard was bent over – yet it didn't change his demeanor one bit – he always had a friendly wave and a smile for anyone who greeted him – for he had learned to live with the constraints of his situation...

Mr. Nordgaard has been dead for many years now – but on the campus of the NDSCS stands a tall "straight" building dedicated to the honor and memory of a man who could never stand up straight – but who taught a lot of people the meaning of learning to "walk tall!"

And, it reminds me of the redemptive way in which God works with us – how He finds us bent, and then uses that very “bentness” to His glory in some special way – and whenever, I am in my hometown, and I drive by the building which bears his name, Nordgaard Hall, it, always, reminds me of the way in which God straightens out the bent circumstances of our lives...

In his hymn, LOVE DIVINE – ALL LOVES EXCELLING, Charles Wesley refers to this “bent-ness” in the stanza which says, *Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit, into every troubled breast! Let us all in Thee inherit; let us find that second rest. Take away our bent to sinning; Alpha and Omega be; End of faith, as its Beginning, set our hearts at liberty.*

Wesley refers to the fact that as human beings we are all “bent.”

We may be believers in Christ, but in many ways we are still “bent” in the direction of sinning. And, yet, Christ is the one who removes that “bent-ness” – and He sets our hearts at liberty! And, He does it on a daily basis, as we bring our “bent-ness” to Him in confession and repentance, and He brings to us forgiveness and redemption!

The New International Version of the Bible says that the woman in our gospel lesson today was crippled "by a spirit."

I find that to be an interesting, and even accurately descriptive phrase.

Because, I've known lots of people who have been crippled “by a spirit.”

Whether it is an evil spirit sent to afflict people by the hand of Satan, or the human spirit which has been afflicted in some way...

And, regardless of the reason, they remain bent over, afflicted by a spirit of some kind, and cannot straighten up.

But, some of them are not bent over -- literally – as was Wally Nordgaard, or the woman spoken of in today's text, but they are bent on the inside – where no one sees the “bentness...”

And, a crippled spirit, although less visible, is just as confining.

It is this kind of “bent-ness” to which Charles Wesley referred in the poetry of his hymn.

I've known of people who were crippled by a spirit of embarrassment.

Embarrassment, over some kind of physical deformity or birthmark, and, even for some, a sense of shame over their life's circumstances.

Maybe a teenaged girl was pregnant out of wedlock.

Maybe a woman had an abortion to get rid of a problem she was afraid would ruin her life.

Maybe a young man was caught stealing something that didn't belong to him.

Maybe a young man married a girl, not because he loved her, but because she was carrying his unborn child...

Maybe your husband or wife abandoned you at some point.

Maybe you married someone who has a chronic and menacing condition – or one of your children has acquired a destructive habit.

I've, also, seen people bent over with a sense of responsibility.

And, no matter how hard they work, or how hard they try, they simply cannot measure up to the goals they set for themselves...or, that, they feel have been imposed on them by someone else...

During a time of great instability in my life – at a time when every place I put my foot seemed like “sinking sand,” I discovered in my NIV study Bible, a footnote commentary to Psalm 95:11 – verse 11 of Psalm 95 speaks of entering into God's rest, and a commentator had this to say about that passage, “the promised land was also called a place where God would give His people rest. Thus, the two statements are equivalent – promised land/promised rest. Here is a fertile concept indicating Israel's possession of a place with God, on the earth where she is secure from all external threats and internal calamities.”

Have you ever longed for such a place?

I have – but not only have I longed for such a place – I found it, in Jesus!

And, that's what happened to a woman, a long time ago – she was in trouble, and, in her bent and broken condition, she looked to Jesus...

Jesus is a hope giver.

Jesus is a dream restorer.

Jesus takes people, who are just barely hanging on with white knuckles and clenched teeth, and gives them a new, and, fresh beginning!

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues one Sabbath day, and a woman was there, who had been crippled for eighteen years.

She was bent over, and, could not straighten up.

And, in many ways, this is a description of all of us who have ever been broken in some way, or even bent, by the circumstances of this earthly life...

And, they walk through life bent over on the inside.

They feel like victims, and they go around with the weight of the world on their shoulders.

I believe there are many people, healthy, intelligent, well-educated people – people who might not look like they are having any problems, and, yet, who go through all of life feeling like losers.

They've got it all, compared to most of the people in the world, but they sabotage themselves, time and again, because their attitude is so bad.

And, when you feel “down on yourself,” when you feel that “there is no hope left, for you,” it causes you to act in irrational ways.

When we have a spirit of inadequacy, when we have a feeling of hopelessness and despair, we are prone to doing dumb and senseless things.

And, subsequently, in the context of our brokenness, we may sabotage ourselves at work, we may sabotage ourselves in our relations with others, and we may end up sabotaging the very happiness for which we have been, so desperately, seeking.

The woman, in today's gospel lesson, had been crippled for eighteen years "by a spirit."

Then Jesus saw her.

What an exciting thought: Jesus saw her!

Most of the time, when you and I are in some kind of trouble, we, generally, feel abandoned by God – and we're certain that God has forgotten all about us.

We're a lot like Joseph of the Old Testament.

Joseph received some pretty shabby treatment at the hands of his older brothers – brothers who were jealous of the attention and affection he received from their father, Jacob.

And, later, while in Egypt, he was falsely accused and unjustly sent to prison.

And, I'm certain, he wondered, at times, if God had forgotten him.

Joseph was a victim of so many unjust circumstances, it is hard to fathom, just how he was able to maintain a sense of trust in God, and express a sweetness of spirit, as well as a confidence in the out-workings of God's providence on his behalf – enough so, that, in later years he could proclaim a word of loving forgiveness to his brothers and utter those remarkable words, *"you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good"* (Genesis 50:20)!

But, most of the time, when you and I are in some kind of trouble, we may feel ostracized, or even further victimized by family and friends, we may feel abandoned by God – and we're pretty certain that God has forgotten about us.

We don't experience His presence or His affirmation, and because we can't see Him, we think He doesn't see us – or even, the terrible situation in which we find ourselves...

And, yet the truth of the matter is, that, as Jesus saw this woman in her distress, He sees us as well!

And, here we find the answer to our feelings of helplessness and despair.

Jesus knows our situation.

Many people are bent over.

Not always physically, though...

Some people are bent by continual sinning.

Sometimes people are bent over emotionally and spiritually.

Some are bent over with a spirit of inadequacy and defeat.

Others are bent over because they have experienced significant trauma in their lives.

One morning, a day care worker by the name of Janice Anthony and her husband, were on their way to work when they, unexpectedly, came upon a cow in the road.

Janice swerved, to miss the cow, and ended up crashing into a telephone pole.

Both she, and her husband were injured.

The next day, Janice returned to work at the day care center, but she was self-conscious about the bruises on her face.

She worried that her appearance might upset the children.

The first child at the day care center, that day, was a bubbly four-year-old named Elizabeth.

Elizabeth ran to give Janice a hug, but stopped short, when she saw Janice's face.

Then, Elizabeth announced with wonder, "Hey, Jan, you have a rainbow on your face!" Where Janice had seen only the ugliness of bruises, little Elizabeth had seen the beauty of rainbow colors.

Some of us, however, have a rainbow of hurt in our hearts.

We live in fear of the future.

Our health is uncertain.

Our jobs are endangered.

We are coping with family matters, or with a host of other things, that are weighing us down, more, even, than people around us, can possibly imagine.

But here's the good news: Jesus knows! Jesus sees us!

We have, in Jesus, a friend who cares about our situation.

Even more importantly, Jesus has the power to lift the heavy burdens from our backs.

Jesus can set us free.

Author Max Lucado tells about his boyhood days of playing football out in the West Texas fields.

The fields where Max and his friends played were full of grass burrs that stuck in their skin.

Sometimes, after a big tackle, a player would have a leg or an arm full of grass burrs.

They stung horribly.

The game came to a stop, while the player pulled out each of the burrs.

Some players wanted to keep on playing in spite of the burrs, but it was usually too painful.

Lucado trusted no one but his father to pull out the burrs.

So, he would leave the game, go home, and get his father to pull out every last burr, then he would return to play.

My friends, there are burrs that only our Father can remove.

Fortunately, God WILL remove them if we trust ourselves to Him.

Jesus knows our needs.

And Jesus has the power to lift burdens from our back.

Luke tells us that when Jesus saw this poor woman, He called her forward, and said to her, *"Woman, you are set free from your infirmity!"*

Then he put his hands on her, and, immediately, she straightened up and praised God!

Jesus can give us what we need to enable us not only to cope with our difficult situations, but also to be victorious over them.

Retired United Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells of a small College Chapel in North Carolina that has one of the most unusual baptismal fonts in the world.

It is made from a huge stone which has been hollowed out for a font.

It was said, that, on that very stone, African slaves stood, to be sold to the highest bidder.

And, today, the stone serves Belmont Abbey as its baptismal font.

An inscription on the plaque tells all who enter those cleansing waters: "On this stone men and women were sold into slavery. From this stone men and women are now baptized into freedom."

By the power of Jesus Christ, you and I can move from slavery to freedom, from despair to victory.

He can lift our burdens, and, He can straighten our backs.

But there is one thing more we need to see: **Jesus calls us to lift one another's burdens.**

It is easy to see ourselves in this story, as the woman whose back was straightened by Jesus. What we need to see, though, is that, as Christ's body in the world, we are to be lifting the burdens of other people in the world.

There was a book written back in the 1960s about an American engineer, Homer Atkins.

Homer Atkins, was sent to Vietnam to build dams and roads for the military.

But Homer refused to build the dams and roads until the Vietnamese government first solved some of the problems of their own people.

At the suggestion of his wife, Homer designed a bicycle treadmill pump to get water up to the hillside paddies, on which the people depended for food.

For centuries this water had been laboriously carried by pails.

Homer's wife Emma was also curious about the fact that every woman, over sixty, had a bent back.

Then she noticed that after the monsoon season, the sweeping of debris from the streets, was invariably done by older people, but mostly women, who used a broom with a short handle.

Since wood for longer handles cost too much, and was in short supply, Emma found a long-stalked reed, and planted shoots from this reed, by her door.

She tended these reeds carefully.

One day when neighbors were visiting at her house, she cut a tall reed, bound coconut fronds to it, and, began to sweep, with her back straight.

When the people questioned her concerning the reed, she told them where they might find them growing.

Four years later, when Emma and Homer were back in Pittsburgh, they received a thank-you letter from the leader of the village.

The letter read: "In the village of Chang Dong today, the backs of our old people are straight and firm. No longer are their bodies painful and bent. You will be pleased to know that on the outskirts of the village, we have placed a small plaque in your honor. On this plaque, are written these words: 'In honor of the woman who unbent the backs of our people.'"

Similar words could be inscribed on the cross, for Christ has unbent millions of backs – including that of the woman in our lesson for the day.

But we cannot stop there.

Like Homer and Emma, we need to consecrate our lives to straightening the backs of others.

Through words of encouragement, and acts of compassion, may we, like our Master, be those who unbend the back of others.

Will you do it?

Let's pray: *Lord, come to us today, and lift the burdens from our backs -- and give us words of encouragement and hope to bring to others as well. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the healer of all life's wounds. Amen.*