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Sermon Title: Advent: Asking for Help

Scripture: Mark 5

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As a lot of you know, I had a little knee surgery a couple weeks ago. I messed up my knee right before the Appalachia trip last June; apparently from a combination of yard work and dancing at Lauren Burch's wedding reception. I'm not giving up dancing, but yard work might have to go. Anyway, I ignored it for five months, which was stupid, and finally had the ol' arthroscopic fix two weeks ago.

Compared to what many of you have journeyed through, a little knee surgery is not a big deal. But it is kind of annoying. And I have to tell you, what I found most challenging was being forced to ask other folks to do things for me. I really, really don't like asking for help. I spent all of Thanksgiving saying things like "could you get that box from the basement for me," "could you move this chair for me," "could you take this upstairs for me." Hated it. *Hated* it. I *don't* like asking for help.

This has been a perennial problem for me, with occasionally near-lethal results. Some of you have heard this story before, but of course, being a preacher, that's not going to stop me. This is the story of my do-it-yourself brake job. Back in graduate school, I had a Geo Prizm, a car you'd be hard-pressed to get anyone to remember anymore. And the brakes were failing on the Geo, in a big way – it had gotten to the point that parking in the student lot involved shifting into first and sort of drifting into the corner of the lot. Something had to be done. And who better to do it, of course, than me – why ask for help, why spend money on help, when good people had already taken the time to write instruction manuals on how to fix your own brakes.

So I got me one of those instruction manuals. Got the car up on cinderblocks, took off the rear tires, pulled everything apart. Biked to an auto parts store – got the brake parts – sat down by the car with a diagram in front of me and the parts... and, um, I just couldn't do it. I didn't have the right tools. A couple of the things I'd pulled off wouldn't go back in, and after many long miserable cold hours – did I mention this was January? -- I finally gave up. So, I put the tires back on, *sans* brakes, and called a tow truck to haul the car down to a New Haven mechanic. I was in the waiting room when the mechanic came out to give his assessment, like a doctor emerging from the operating room with a diagnosis.

The mechanic was ashen-faced and trembling. "I've never seen anything like this," he said. "Miss, I don't know how to tell you this, but some sicko took your tires off, took out your brakes, and then stuck your tires back on. You coulda *died!*"

I handed him the shoebox I was carrying. "What's this?" he said. "Uh , it's uh ... it's the brakes." I said. "I thought I could –" "What are you, nuts?" he said, all sympathy gone. "Listen," he said, " you gotta know when it's time to ask for help. And when your brakes aren't working, it's time to ask for help."

I would like to say that I learned my lesson from this, but I actually had a very similar conversation with the cable guy here in Fairfield when I decided to save money by running my own cable wires through the heating ducts, and then couldn't figure why (a) the signal was bad, and (b) the back room didn't seem as warm any more. You know just to enough to be really dangerous, he said to me. And in an echo of that car mechanic, there was the cable guy telling me: you gotta know when to ask for help.

You gotta know when to ask for help. I'm still struggling with it. But I know, though, that I'm not alone. Three weeks ago, the day before election day, I sent out an email to all our youth group kids and families to see who wanted to go down to the beach and help out. A whole lot of people said "count me in". Then I realized I had to find someone who wanted help. I put in a call to a friend, someone I knew had a home on the beach, and rental properties too. I left a message on his voicemail. "Hey," I said, "I've got a bunch of people. Do you want help?"

After a little while, he called back, and he said yes, yes, he needed help – and we headed down with our shovels and our rakes and we got to work. But later he told me this. He said, “you know, it was really hard to call you back. I heard your message, and I have to tell you, it was really really hard to admit that I needed help. I thought probably someone else needed it worse, I could do for myself. I did need help. But it was really hard to call.”

The Bible Study this Fall, which David leads, has been focused on the Gospel of Mark. They get together Thursday morning and Thursday evening, and this past Thursday evening I was the substitute teacher; David was leading a memorial service. And we looked at Mark chapter 5, part of which John just read to you. There are three amazing stories of healing in that chapter, and one of them is the story John read. It’s about a powerful man, Jairus, leader of the synagogue in his town, which means a guy who was doing all right, used to getting things done. Until his daughter got sick. And sicker. And everything he knew to do, and the people who knew to pay, and the prayers who knew to say, they weren’t working. So in desperation and need and humility he goes to find Jesus.

And as we’re reading this story, and all the stories of healing in that chapter, one of the folks in that Thursday night gathering, one of you, said to the rest of us, *Do you notice when the healing begins in each of these stories?* And we all said, “yeah, sure, it’s when Jesus does his blessing thing, lays his hands on, says the right words.” And the one of us who asked the question said “look again. The healing starts, the healing always starts, when someone asks for help. For each person in these stories, the healing begins when they finally, finally, ask Jesus for help.”

And that was true. Jairus, the man who could anything done he wanted, couldn’t do it by himself. His healing, his daughter’s healing, began the moment he dropped to his knees in front of Jesus and said *please help me. please come to my home, we need you. Please help.*

You gotta know when to ask for help. Healing always begins -- healing *only* begins -- when you’re willing to ask for help. Like the New Haven car mechanic standing there looking at me, unbelieving, a shoebox of brakes in my hands: You gotta know, he said, when it’s time to ask for help.

That's actually what the season of Advent is all about. Knowing that it's time to ask for help. That's honestly what Advent is all about. I know, I know, that doesn't sound too holly jolly– and yes, this season is jolly, and merry and joyful, yes, there are lights and cookies and decorations and a whole lot of fun. But at some really, *really* basic down deep, soul deep level, the season of Advent is when all of us, all God's children, realize it's time to ask for help. Advent is when all humanity, says to God, *Help!* We humans really can't do this on our own. We need help. We need a Savior. We need God to be with us, we need God WITH us, we need Emmanuel. We need someone to show us the way, show us the way of love. We need someone to bring us healing, we need something like a Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, King of Kings. Yeah. That's what we need.

Advent is the whole world taking a deep breath, getting down on its knees and saying “all right, we admit it. we can't quite fix this on our own. We could use help.” You gotta know when to ask for help.

On Thursday night at SPF youth group, and on Friday at our Communal Table luncheon, we were blessed to be in the presence of perhaps the most gentle and faithful man I've ever encountered. Rev. Walter Everett was with us. I'd preached about him many years ago, but had never met him. I'd preached about him because his story astounded me. He was the father of a young man murdered at the age of 24, and Walter Everett had somehow managed to forgive his son's murderer, and more than that, to befriend his son's murderer, and more than that, to advocate for his early release from prison, and more than that, Walter Everett officiated at his wedding, at Mike Carlucci's wedding. I'd known the story years ago – Walt Everett was one of the first people Matt Lauer interviewed when he got his new gig on the Today show.

I'd known the story, but to *hear* this gentle, Christlike man tell it to us – well, none of us could keep from crying. But one thing he wanted to make sure we heard, make sure we understood, was that it wasn't easy. That forgiveness wasn't easy.

“I didn't want to forgive,” he said. “I didn't like this man. He had taken my son from me. But I couldn't stand the way I was living. I was carrying this terrible burden of anger all the time, it was destroying me. And so I prayed to

God. And I asked for help. I said, God, I can't do anymore. I need healing, I need help."

And God made it pretty clear to him what he had to do. And so it was that Walt found himself sitting at his desk, on the anniversary of his son's death, writing a long letter to the man who took his child's life, a letter that said "I forgive." That forgiveness led to healing not only for Walt but for the man who would become, astonishingly, his *friend*, Mike. But it all began, it all began, with a plea for help. It all began when Walt asked God for help.

And so his story, his extraordinary story, is not only a forgiveness story, not only a healing story, but it is an Advent story.

We have a little over three weeks until we celebrate Christmas; four Sundays together, and then a burst of candles and Christmas trees and carols and joy. Use these three weeks to *be joyful*, to delight in the season, to celebrate and rejoice. But use them also to think about *your* needs, your deepest desires, your own longing for healing. Use the time ahead to *ask for help*, prayerfully, earnestly, open and honestly, ask for help.

Because it's on the way. It's on the way. The angels are tuning their harps, the shepherds are heading for the hillside with their sheep, and a young weary couple is beginning their walk toward Bethlehem.

Help is on the way.
Just ask.

Amen.