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“Jesus saw their faith” (Luke 5:20).

Isa 35:1-10; Luke 5:17-26

A number of years back when Rome was issuing new translations for the Mass prayers, one of the casualties was the opening line of the Nicene Creed. For those who remember, the community used to say, “We believe,” and this was changed to “I believe,” perhaps to pinpoint the individual believer with the requirement for faith. It seemed a small change, but one of the authors for Celebration, NCR’s worship publication, offered a thought worth sharing.

There are times, she wrote, when we struggle to believe, but the community carries us along while we work out our doubts. What a comfort there is in knowing that we are all in this pilgrimage together. On difficult days, in times of darkness, believers around us pick up the slack, make up for our lack of fervor and faith.

Today’s Gospel story offers its own commentary on the importance of the community. Of all the healing stories in the Gospels, this one is distinctive because of the amazing determination of the four friends who carry the paralyzed man to Jesus, pushing their way through the crowds, lifting him up onto the roof, removing the tiles and lowering him down into the middle of the audience packed in around Jesus. It is a dramatic and astonishing scene.

When the paralyzed man on the stretcher comes down through the hole in the roof, the story says that “Jesus saw their faith.” We do not know the intent or state of mind of the paralyzed man, but it seems clear that Jesus was impressed with the faith of his four friends. They had gotten him there with the absolute expectation that he was going to be healed. With faith like this, Jesus knew from experience that God was present and that something wonderful was going to happen.

Much else is going in Luke’s story, of course, but if we stop here, we can already feel God’s presence and power in the Word. When we carry one another, God is present. When at times we need to be carried, the faith of others is part of the healing and forgiveness we always find in the community. What I believe or do not believe can sometimes be a lonely journey, even a cause for paralysis and discouragement. But what we believe together is always bigger and more powerful than my own effort to walk in faith.

The importance of the community has been brought home to us more than ever by the pandemic and the isolation we have all experienced these many months. Even separated physically, Advent is a pilgrimage of faith we can still make because, whether we need to be carried or are able to carry others, God will be at work in us.

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