

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
February 28, 2021
Annual Parish Meeting, John 5:1-15

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

The haggard man leans against the half-wall of the portico, clutching his mat. The mat, like its possessor, has frayed at its edges, several threadbare holes threatening to unravel what remains of it. Though dozens crowd the entrance to the pool, everyone knows *this* man, even if none would guess that thirty-eight yearsⁱ have passed since he posted himself there ... except, of course, that he announces his tenure's length and difficulty to anyone glancing in his direction.

The local crowd questions his claim as they float in the stirred waters: "I've been coming to Beth-zathaⁱⁱ for twenty seasons," one will say, "and I'm telling you, that cat was not here in those first years." Nodding, another will exclaim, "And I've seen him walk ... I mean, just pick up his mat *and walk!*" They have trodden these suspicions and annoyances until their conversation's turns are as unmovable and inevitable as the man and his mat ... yet they return to their familiar exchanges again and again, the rote prelude of their bathing prayers.

Though only an occasional visitor to the pool, Jesus well remembers the man from earlier trips to Jerusalem. As a boy, the desperation he heard in the man's cries had startled Jesus into an offer of assistance: "I will help you into the water," Jesus announced, before he could make account of his words or their consequence.

"Oh, you are a kind child," the man replied, "and I appreciate your gesture. Really, I do. But it is no use: as anyone can see, the others here are too big and too selfish. And I ... I am simply too sick, too weak. Even with your help, we will never make it to the pool." Before Jesus could argue any reassurance, the man closed his eyes and sighed, his declaration that he had spoken his last on the subject.

On that day, Jesus remained before the man for an extended beat, breathing deeply the moment, all the scene's details. Once rejoined with his family and hometown neighbors, the teenager looked over his shoulder more than once to see if the man might have lifted his head or waved a change of heart ... but Jesus saw no stirring before the man shrunk out of sight altogether.

These many years later, Jesus has travelled far and seen much. In only the weeks before this early morning, Jesus has passed through Samaria on his way from Judea to Galilee, meeting the woman at Jacob's well and offering her "living water."ⁱⁱⁱ As his journey continued through Cana, Jesus encountered a royal official whose son was gravely ill, and he reassured the administrator of the little boy's recovery.^{iv} Now entering Jerusalem, Jesus hears the cries before he can see the man, but, no matter: Jesus recognizes the voice.

As Jesus approaches Beth-zatha, the man looks at Jesus and says nothing. Trembling, he pulls his mat to his chin and clenches it with both hands.

Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?”^v

The man does not answer the question that Jesus asks. He stammers, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else *always* steps down ahead of me.”^{vi}

“I see,” Jesus responds.^{vii}

And somewhere in the way Jesus holds those long e’s – *lee seee* – synapses flash and the man recognizes the stranger child from that long-ago festival day, the one who had offered to help. Before the man can make full account of either his memory or his action, he stands. He picks up his mat and leaves the hard stone of his familiar place in the portico.^{viii}

Though largely unpracticed in the bustle of day, the man does not slink as in the wee hours. He stands straight. He strides surefooted. He walks with purpose, with somewhere – *I can go anywhere!* – to go. The shame he harbored and the embarrassment he feared, begins to leave him with each tingling step ... all by the voice of this boy-now-a-man whose question wrested free a long-guarded hope, one the man believed too precious to test. With little more than a look and the possibility of love, this stranger called the man’s dream of life into being, and now he walks ... *free*. Feeling light, he pauses, closes his eyes, and fills his chest with possibility.

“I told you he could walk!” one of the locals exclaims, his distinct voice sharp and loud.^{ix}

The man opens his eyes and darts his head toward the familiar sound. He cowers instinctively and began to worry his knees might not hold much longer.

The local pulls the towel from his shoulders and snaps the ground with it. Tucking a rolled newspaper under his arm, he convenes his leering cohort to surround the man. “Unbelievable,” another responds, before putting a finger in the chest of the healed man and announcing, “And, hey: you can’t carry your mat *today* – it’s the sabbath.”^x The men laugh.

“The man who made me well – he said to me, ‘Take up you mat and walk.’ And I did.”^{xi}

“Wait a minute: *today*? This guy said this to you *today*, the Sabbath? Where is he? Show him to us.”^{xii} The locals scan the crowd for the rabblouser, squinting at every ratty knapsack, as though they could discern which of the visitors packed hometown trouble with their Temple fare.

“I don’t know his name. He visits the city, but he does not live here.”^{xiii}

“You don’t know? *You don’t know?* All those years by the pool, and you didn’t even ask for a name. Well, that I can believe. Come on, we’ll carry you back to your place on our way to the pool, and we will see you past this trouble. Don’t worry: by tomorrow morning, everything will be back to the way it was.”

Before he can have an idea otherwise, they lift the man to their shoulders, walk him through the criss-crossing crowds, and set him against the half-wall. They say nothing more to the man and step into the water.

The man's heart beats fast and hard in his ears, in his teeth. His flushed cheeks red, he searches his emotions and realizes that he feels *relieved*. Despite the commotion around him, he lays his head on his hands and sleeps.

By the time the man wakes, the pool is quiet. Some travelers have made simple camps for the night, and he can hear the clink of a Roman guard policing the city's perimeter. Though he searches for the relief he felt upon returning to Beth-zatha, its comfort eludes him. Distracted, he picks up his mat and walks: not the purposeful steps he had taken earlier that day, but confused, destinationless strides.

"You have been made well! I am glad to see you, friend." Jesus declares, disturbing the man's stupor. "And have you come to the Temple to pray?"^{xiv}

"The Temple?" he asks, unaware of his surroundings.

"Come," Jesus offers warmly, putting an arm around the man, "we can pray together that your spirit will *keep* – keep you strong and keep you out of trouble."^{xv}

The man goes with Jesus.

Sunbleached and unwashed, Jesus and his friends eat and drink and talk loudly around a fire. There is an energy about them, something powerful and compelling when they describe to one another a "New Jerusalem." As they laugh and cheer this new city's generousities of spirit and substance, the man, who has said nothing, realizes they do not speak idly. He realizes they mean to *change* Jerusalem – change *everything* – and though he leans into their excitement as far as he can, he feels afraid ... more hollow than hopeful.

As his hosts empty their wineskins, the man leaves without causing a stir. He returns to his half-wall, but he does not sleep.

Not long after dawn, the locals appear. The man rises to his feet and meets them at the portico's entrance. Interrupting their conversation, the man announces: "His name is Jesus. He is a Nazarene, and he is at the Temple with a gang of his followers."^{xvi}

As the locals quickly turn to discuss among themselves this intelligence they have received, the man realizes that he had dared hope his gesture would spark some belonging with the men. But he now realizes his foolishness – the foolishness of all he has endured during the last days – and so he sets himself on the stones he has worn smooth and shiny, there at the very edge of the pool.

Oh, Trinity Church, do we want to be made well?

Some scriptures recount Good News tales of happy endings and present clear inspiration ... while others offer competing truths calling *us* to discern the Good News and write that Gospel into our *own* lives. This morning's appointment from John qualifies as the latter variety: an inspiring tale of God's miraculous love and mercy, *yes* ... but, also an indicting account of our fear and our grief, our lethargy and our cruelty.

Surely the story at Beth-zatha remains true – true *for* us, true *of* us – yet, like this pandemic itself, *we can choose* to receive this story as a vital prelude to our renewed righteousness ... not another rote prayer of commiseration and conspiracy that we read only to confirm our *despair* – to keep things as they are – but as the passing wilderness endured on our way to a New Jerusalem ... where we will join Jesus and the disciples with food and drink at the fire, laughing and our renewed community, cheering our reconciled city.

For, people of God, after this long year, I believe we *do* want to be made well ... *I believe we do want to be made well!* And I believe we are not alone in our desire to be healed and to heal, for the Holy Spirit works within us even now, *in this very moment*, redeeming all the brokenness of 2020, and wresting free our most carefully guarded hopes and calling them into being.

Oh, friends, there is no going back to 2019, and thanks be to God for that. Let us pick up our mats, leave our familiar, stony, seats, and go together somewhere new ... transformed ... *better* ... yes, “abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.”

People of God, I will see you there.

In the name of this Holy and healing One,
Amen.

ⁱ John 5:5.

ⁱⁱ John 5:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 4:1-30.

^{iv} John 4:46-54.

^v John 5:6.

^{vi} John 5:7.

^{vii} John 5:8, in the retelling, the sentiment – “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” – conveyed with a look.

^{viii} John 5:9.

^{ix} John 5:10a.

^x John 5:10b.

^{xi} John 5:11, and picking up Jesus' spoken commission from 5:8.

^{xii} John 5:12.

^{xiii} John 5:13.

^{xiv} John 5:14a.

^{xv} John 5:14b.

^{xvi} John 5:15.