

“From Waiting to Walking”

A Sermon Preached by Kirk Hall
First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, North Carolina
January 1, 2012

John 5:1-9a

In the mid-20th century, archeologists uncovered the ancient Pool of Bethzatha. Today, if you travel to Jerusalem, you can see it excavated with its five porticoes. The pool remains just north of the Great Temple, about 100 feet northwest of St. Anne’s church.¹ In the first century, this pool was used to cleanse and purify sacrificial animals before they were taken through the Sheep Gate² up to the Temple to be offered to God. Because of its use, the water of the pool was thought by the Hellenistic culture to have special cleansing or healing powers. To make this more mysterious, the water of the pool, from time to time, would begin to rise and stir on its own.

While archeologists might argue that this stirring was caused by the pool’s natural spring source below, many believed that it was caused by an angel of the Lord would come down from heaven from time to time to stir the waters.³ And whoever stepped in the pool first (after the angel stirred the water) was healed, made well, from whatever disease or ailment that they had.⁴ So in the first century, the sick and the lame would come, sit by the pool and wait to be the first one in after its waters were stirred.

In our reading today, there was a man there who had been paralyzed for 38 years, sitting by this pool, waiting to make his way into the waters. Jesus has come to Jerusalem for a festival and, as he is walking toward the Temple, he walks by this pool of invalids and finds this man sitting and waiting. So Jesus decides (in no uncertain terms) to “stir the waters,” himself. **Please read John 5:1-9.**

I don’t know about you but each year, during the week after Christmas – (right after the Christ child is born), I seem to experience what must be a little bit of a postpartum depression. It seems like the moment that Christ finally arrives, the presents are open and put away, a meal is shared, the friends and families have come and gone and the time to clean up and put away the decorations has come and it’s hard to know where to start – do we even want to start?

Since Thanksgiving, it seems that getting ready for the holiday has taken on a life of its own. Decorating the house, putting up the tree, shopping for that perfect something, (making a list, checking it twice), wrapping the gifts – we go to the parties, we see friends and family, we gather on Christmas Eve with the lights, the music, the traditions. Then, just like that, it’s over. The waiting and expectation and anticipation marks the season so deeply that when Christmas Day finally comes, it’s here and gone and then Boxing Day (what is Boxing Day?) and now, a week later, what now? Back to work? Pay the visa bills, return the clothes that don’t fit? Getting excited about what is to come where the fun is – what now? And I have to wonder if we ever really want Christmas Day

to arrive? God comes into the world as a child and ends the waiting . Now we have to go back to the routine world, back to work and wait for next year.

For the man in our scripture today, waiting had become his life. For 38 years, this man had been waiting for new life – that day when he could be the first one in the pool when the waters were stirred. In all that time, 38 years, I am sure that his waiting took on a life of its own. He probably had a place where he sat each day, a strategic place where he could watch the waters – a place where he would return after someone else beat him to the punch. He learned how to beg for a little food and after 38 years, it had become second nature. He probably knew all of the others who gathered together, maybe they got to be friends - a “community of waiting” who watched the stronger ones come and go. After 38 years, it had to feel like home. What else was there?

And when the waters stirred, he knew the drill – who would jump and who would slide, who would push and who would pull – how the open pool of friends quickly became ‘everyone for themselves’ in a mad rush to the stirring water. After a while, he had probably learned not to depend on anyone to help him in and that there would always be someone faster, someone quicker on the draw. So, after 38 years, any excitement for “what could be,” I am sure, had eroded into some form of comfortable complacency for “what was.” And any fleeting hope for change, for healing, had deteriorated into a more reliable despair. The waiting had become his life, the destination, rather than the journey, the ends, rather than the means. Could he even remember what he was waiting for in the first place?

When Jesus saw the man lying there and “knew that he had been there a long time,” Jesus asked him this profound question, “Do you want to be made well?” The man’s reaction sounds like he couldn’t even imagine the thought. He responds not with what he was waiting for, but rather with the reasons as to why he was still waiting. “Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool...while I am making my way, someone else steps down in front of me.” He sounds resigned, even bitter. I am sure that the justification for “the way is” had beaten out of him any hope for the way that it “could be.” The man had settled in his world or maybe this world had settled in him – he was “institutionalized.”

A few years ago, the great movie *Shawshank Redemption* was released. If you haven’t seen it, I recommend it to you all. The film is about a man named Anthony Dufrane (played by Tim Robbins) who is wrongly convicted of murder and sent to Shawshank prison to wait out 2 life sentences. He quickly learns that life inside the prison is a world unto itself with its own set of codes and complacencies that not only shape this world but also shape those who live in it long enough. Dufrane got to know these characters and their own resignation to the waiting. A community whose survival was based on accepting the fate that nothing would change. “Hope,” one veteran inmate told him when he first arrived, “Hope is a dangerous thing. It has no use on the inside.”

So those who lived on the inside just existed. They found their place in that world and expected nothing more. Their identities were based on their habits, how well they could manipulate the system and what you could offer to the other inmates. Parole became a

joke. That is, until the point when the eldest inmate's parole came up and he was going to be released after 50 years inside the prison.

When he found out, this gentle, elderly man grabbed his close friend and put a knife to his neck and threatened to kill him. It turns out that he was so frightened of living free that maybe if he killed someone they would let him stay inside. After so much time on the inside, how could he learn to survive as a free man? Inside he had his own identity, he was an important man, a respected man – outside he was nothing. How could he survive?

After the episode, Red (played by Morgan Freeman) described this as being “institutionalized.” Red explained, “I’m telling you, these walls are funny. First you hate them, then you get used to them, enough time passes you get so you depend on them.”⁵

In our reading today, this man that Jesus finds at the pool had been there for 38 years. 38 years of isolation from the world. 38 years of routine, of expectations (or lack thereof). 38 years of knowing himself and being known as an invalid, the one who spends his life waiting. The pool had become a prison and a home – I am sure that there was a strange comfort in being there. If he were made well, this man would have to take on a new identity as a free man. He would have to learn a trade, build a home, make it in a society he hasn't known in a long time. He would have to go through the growing pains of living as a man “made well” and that takes work, it takes facing fears, it takes a hope that I am sure he hadn't known in a while.

So when Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” This was not a rhetorical question. It's a personal question – it was a spiritual question – there was a lot at stake. Writer and theologian C.S. Lewis once wrote that, “a familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom.”⁶

I had a friend a few years ago who, while a successful lawyer, shared with me his deep desire to leave his practice and to teach high school, maybe coach the basketball team. Talking about it, he got excited – you could feel his passion for it. He talked about how teaching was his calling, it filled him and excited him and he had the gifts. So I asked him why he didn't just make the change – try it out, share his passion with students. His shoulders literally sank – he kinda laughed to say that there was no way. He reminded me that he had a membership at a country club in town, a second home on the shore and his kids were in private schools (and they would need that if they wanted to get into Davidson College). He called his lucrative job, his career, the way he spends most of his waking hours, “a pair of golden handcuffs.” It's true that “a familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom.”

I could rattle off a list of examples but maybe you know of someone, maybe even yourself, who has been estranged from an old friend for some reason. “Fences make good neighbors,” they keep us safe. And to reconcile, you would have to forgive and accept and be accepted and it is much easier just to “sit by the pool” and remain bitter and distant.

Or maybe you want to reach out to someone having a hard time of it but you're held back by the fear of being vulnerable and (after all) it's much easier to hope and pray from a distance, avoid the disappointment, save the energy because in the end, deep down, you tell yourself, "it's everyone for themselves."

Or maybe even you read the paper and get so disgusted at the way the world is going and you want to do something – to be a part of the solution in some way, but that takes creativity, it takes energy, learning how to walk with new legs, living in the world but not of the world, and it's much easier to just throw up your hands and blame it on the system. Do you want to be made well?

It's not a rhetorical question. It's a personal question – a spiritual question. It's a dangerous and radical invitation toward transformation – to actually receive and accept the gift for which we have been waiting – a gift of joy *and* responsibility, of hope *and* accountability. A Christmas gift that calls us to take the risks that come with loving – to stand up, take our "hopes and fears of all the years" and to walk into a new life for something bigger than ourselves. To walk out of our disappointments and excuses about the way the world "is" and into a life living out the way the world "could be." A place where hungers are filled, where peacemakers are blessed and called children of God, a place where all are invited to eat and drink together as one. A world where the greatest gifts opened on Christmas morning are faith, hope and love and the day we open them is the day that the real celebration begins. But do you want to be made well?

Because the Bible tells us that in order to have this life, we must first die to the old. To fully love, we must risk the pain and the hurt. To live well, we must not only rejoice with those who rejoice but (also) to weep with those who weep,⁷ and (in humility) to regard others as better than yourselves.⁸ In that new world outside of our pools of complacency, we are called to kneel down to this peasant child and follow him even unto a cross. Do you want to be made well?

Today, one week after we celebrate the reality of God in Christ coming into our world (this place that we have come to know as a home and as a prison), today (as we resolve to make the future a better place) this question graciously haunts us all; Do you want to be made well? Not do you want to smile more as you grit your teeth at the others step over you on their way to the pool. Not do you promise to find a better strategy to get to the water when it stirs but, first; do you even want to be made well?

If you don't, it is certainly understandable; after all, it's true that "a familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom." No one can blame you. But if you do, on this first day of ... the rest of our lives on earth, hear the words of Jesus Christ, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

¹ Klinger, Jerzy. Bethesda and the Universality of the Logos, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27.03 pp 169-85. See also Gerard S. Sloyan's, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, John* (Atlanta: John Knox) 1971, pp77-81.

² Archeologists believe that the gate today known as St. Stephen's Gate is the site of the Sheep Gate mentioned in the text. I use the ancient name here for homiletic connectivity to the scripture.

³ Like many other pools in the Jerusalem area, this is an intermittent spring. At times, water is released in surges from hidden reservoirs in the hills around the city, causing these springs to rise and fall suddenly. This is not to say that healings did not occur here.

⁴ While this historical explanation is traditionally included in John 5 as verse 4, scholars believe that this scriptural explanation was added to the text at a later date. It is for this reason the NRSV (among others) omits this verse and (often) includes the description in the notes.

⁵ *The Shawshank Redemption*, dir. Frank Darabont, writ. Stephen King (short story) and Frank Darabont, perf. Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, Castle Rock, DVD, 1994.

⁶ I am indebted to Pastor Christopher Romig for this insight.

⁷ Romans 12:15

⁸ Philippians 2:3