

Starting to Walk

John 5: 1-9 The Message (MSG)

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The gospels contain numerous stories told either by Jesus or about Jesus. Most of them are fairly brief and are rather skimpy on details. We are given little if any information about what occurred leading up to the event or about what happened afterward.

We generally know very little about the people involved, not even their name. They are just a “woman at a well”, a “stranger on the road”, a “man by a pool”. The facts of the story don’t seem to be all that important but rather the Truth in the story and even that is not always obvious or easily contained.

And so that is the job of the preacher, to try to find the truth revealed there (or at least some truth, as well as he or she can understand it) and to sort of point at it so that others might at least start looking in the right direction to find some truth for themselves.

To do this, we might retell the story from a different perspective or perhaps place it in a more modern context. Or we might re-imagine the story with re-imagined details to help us to better see ourselves in it, to closer identify and to hopefully gain a deeper understand.

And so that is what I would like to ask you to do with me this morning. To re-imagine this story of a man, who had an encounter with Jesus, by a pool they called Bethesda, as perhaps it might have been, or at least it could have been. It is my attempt to point at the truth that I see in this story, a truth that I have experienced in my own life and have witnessed countless other times in the lives of others.

So let us re-imagine this story, this story of a man by a pool, as he might have told it.

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I don't know that I can truthfully say just how, or even when, it all began. No matter what the thing, there is always a thing before. Things happen, things pile up, things change, and other things refuse to.

I was a common laborer, a carpenter or sorts. How else was a man like me to put food on the table? And mostly it did. But you never get ahead that way.

I built things; tables, doors, sometimes a room or two. I worked with what was available- wood and stone mostly. It was hard work of course. But it was honest work and it was a life, such as it was.

When I became a man (still a boy through my more aged eyes) I married the daughter of a baker. Neither of us had much choice in the matter but nor did we have much objection.

I guess you build a marriage and a life from what is available too, and we were what was available to each other. But looking back on it, I have no doubt that if I had had a choice, I would have chosen her, and I am almost as certain that she would have chosen me as well.

Being with her brought me comfort in a time and place where comfort was a hard thing to find. She would laugh at the least little thing and that would get me to laughing too, even when I had no idea what had so amused her.

When we sat on the roof at night under the stars and I would tell her about a wall or some crude piece of furniture I was building, she would listen to my every word in such a way as to make the work seem of some significance and worth, though I knew it was only a trifle. But I loved the way she set her eyes on me and I would give the world to be seen that way again.

3

With work like that and a life like that there was always the sore back and the dead tired arms and legs. There were scraped knuckles and hammered thumbs and it seems a misplaced stone that slips from a wall will almost always find a sandaled foot or a protruding toe to cushion its fall.

It came on me sort of slow really. I began noticing that I was more tired at the end of the day and it was harder to get going in the morning. I thought nothing of it at first- it was hard work after all.

Then it seemed the wooden beams started getting heavier and more difficult to lift. I kept doing what I needed to do of course, for what choice does a man like me really have, but I moved slower and I felt less steady on my feet.

Then came the first fall and then the next one. I would just be walking along and suddenly, without warning, my legs would turn into wet ropes and I would hit the ground- hard. In my world, there were no soft places to land. Soon I could hardly walk at all and work became impossible.

Her father would spare us a little bread at the end of the day and my folks would give what help they could. But it wasn't much to live on, so we were in an awful state. We knew that if things didn't improve, we would soon be begging with the lepers and the otherwise infirmed.

But there was this pool up in Jerusalem they said, and from time to time the water in that pool would begin to get all stirred up and begin to bubble and roll all on its own. Some said it was an angel that stirred the water and though I don't know much about things such as that, I have no better explanation for it.

But whatever the cause of it, they said that when the water began to stir like that, the first person who got down into the pool would be cured of any infirmity they might have. Many people had come there (the sick, the blind, the lame, even the paralyzed) and they said that many had been cured.

4

So, since we had nothing to lose, I suppose and everything to gain (if what they said was true) we went up to Jerusalem and we entered through the Sheep Gate and there close by we found that pool, the pool they called Bethesda.

There were lots of people there, maybe hundreds of them, sitting or lying around on the steps or in the alcoves that surrounded the pool. Some, like me, had family or friends with them, others seemed to have no one at all.

It wasn't that the water would stir up every day like that, or even every week for that matter. Sometimes it may happen a couple of times a month but at other times it might be only a few times a year. And you never knew what time of day or night it might happen either. I guess angels feel no need to adhere to a schedule.

So, the chances of being in just the right place at just the right time and to be the first to get into the pool were slim at best. Some folks would give up rather quickly and return home to whatever fate they came with. Others, like me, would end up staying for years. I don't know if we were more stubborn or more desperate (or maybe we just had no place else to go).

She was determined to stay there with me. She was always sure that the next time would be our time and I would be the first to get into the water and I would be cured of all that afflicted me. And a few times we did get close.

We would just happen to be down next to the edge of the pool just when the water started moving. She would help me, as best she could, and I would make my way toward the water as quickly as I could manage, but each time, just before we could get there, someone else would slip into the water from the other side.

It was disheartening to us both, but she would never give up and would never let me give up either. She would do anything to see me well again.

5

People came there with all sorts of infirmities and illnesses. At times a sickness would spread through the crowd. It was in the winter of our eighth year there that she became ill. She didn't say a word about it at first, but I could tell that something was wrong. Then I noticed that her hands and face were terribly hot to the touch.

She got so sick that she could not eat or drink anything. Nothing I could find to do seemed to help her though God knows I tried. I knew in that moment that if the water began to stir and I could somehow manage it, I would put her into the water ahead of me. But the water remained dark and still, and I never got that chance. She died on what remains, the saddest night of my life.

After that, there seemed to be nothing much to hope for and so I guess I just stopped trying. Hurt turned to anger and anger turned to bitterness as I began to question why my life had come to such a place as this.

Some said that God was surely punishing me for some sin in my life. But though I fully admit that I have never been a perfect man, the truth is, I could never quite reconcile that what faults I had, deserved such a response.

Over the years I witnessed the fortunate ones slip into the water and come up, in some way, I suppose, cured. Some came up with a "whoop" and you could tell that the cure had gone all the way to the heart. They would smile and offer words of encouragement to the others and some would even stay around and try to help the ones they had befriended to have their chance in the water too.

But others came out of the water no different really than they were when they went in. Sure, their physical affliction may have been better, but they still seemed just as filled with resentment and anger as they ever were- resentment toward the others who had made it into the water before them, anger at fate or God or the whole world, for the fact that they had suffered at all.

6

If there is one thing that all those years lying by that pool taught me, it's that there is more than one way to be crippled. Not all who are cured, you see, are also healed.

There were always the gawkers who stopped by. Some came in hopes that they might witness the miracle of the water. Others came with acts of mercy bringing a little food or wine to share with those who waited.

And I am certain that more than a few came because it made them feel more fortunate when they looked on those of us who were obviously less so. You could tell by the look on their faces that they were convinced that both they and we fully deserved our current station and circumstance.

I had come to the point where I hardly noticed them anymore. But then came that day and that moment when I looked up and saw a man standing at the top of the stairs above me. At first, he seemed no different from all the others. I did notice that his hands looked strong and callused like mine had been and I remember wondering if he might be a carpenter too.

He was looking around at the people there, but it seemed as though he was looking for someone in particular (perhaps a brother or a friend). But then when he saw me, and his eyes met mine, he stopped as though somehow, I was the very one he was looking for.

He made his way carefully through the crowd down to where I was lying on my mat and sat on the step beside me. For what seemed like an eternity, he sat there quietly looking into the stillness of the pool. I could see the blue of the water reflected in the depths of his eyes. And then he said the strangest thing. "Do you want to get well?" he asked me, "Do you want to get well?"

At first, I tried to deflect the question by complaining that I had no one left to help me into the pool. What did he expect me to do? But in my heart, I knew what he was asking me and frankly, I was no longer sure, for what is “well” anyway.

7

After 38 years lying by that pool, I could hardly remember what life was like. It seems that given long enough, a person can make a bed and lie down in it even in hell and can make friends with every demon there.

Then he slowly stood, reached his carpenter’s hand out toward me and with all the certainty in the world in his voice he told me to get up, to take up my bedroll and to start walking.

In that moment, it was as though a tiny drop of hope deep down inside me began to stir and to bubble and to grow. It was as though there was something like a pool of Bethesda within me and some angel was stirring it and I was being healed, healed from the inside out. Almost without thinking, I took his hand and I did stand up and I took one step. And then I took another... and another.

I couldn’t believe that I was standing on my own two feet again. It had been such a very long time. I turned and looked at him and the look on my face must have been dumb founded because he smiled at me and then he laughed. He laughed, and his laugh was light, and kind and it reminded me of her laugh. And I took another step.

And then I bend down and picked up my bedroll and I walked. I walked away from that place of sickness and hopelessness and death.

I will never fully understand what happened that day. It’s not that all my problems suddenly went away. I still walk with a bit of a limp and sometimes climbing the steps to my rooftop in the evening is almost more than I can manage. And I still miss her deeply. But on those nights when I can make it up to the rooftop and I look up into the deep night sky, I know that I am not alone there and the God who is present in all of creation and even the stars above wishes me well.

In the name of the one who is able to heal our life even in the midst of our life,
Amen.