

John 5:1-15 After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Hebrew called Beth-za'tha, which has five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed. One man was there, who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew that he had been lying there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, it is not lawful for you to carry your pallet." But he answered them, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Take up your pallet, and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your pallet, and walk'?" Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

Christ is Risen!

Its still Eastertide!

Thank you for joining me today. I'm honored to have been asked to speak.

One today's readings come from the gospel of John, as we heard earlier. It is part of John's 'book of signs'. The signs are stories that inspire us, but beyond themselves, they point to profound truths about God and human nature. They point to the truth that the Kingdom of God has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ. This particular story is an example of the divine power to restore a person to wholeness. This sign is at once incarnational, and an icon of death and resurrection. Eastertide Sundays readings often involve water, healing, renewal.

Around the time I was asked to speak, several weeks ago, I took a trip to California to see some friends. I had chosen that time to start to think about this story. I arrived in California to be greeted by an email from one of my friends, about my friend Seth. Now Seth is a longtime friend of mine from college. And the email explained that Seth was in a bind, and would be getting counseling, and the circle of friends it was addressed to had the opportunity to help out in offsetting the cost of the counseling sessions. And what a pickle Seth found himself in. He had been unemployed, but had received two promising job offers. He had also been dating a girl, long-distance. His heart was set on this one, he wanted to marry her. And so, one of the job offers was strangely retracted. And then she dumped him. And then, even more strangely, the other job offer was retracted. And Seth was spiraling downward. Seth was emotionally and mentally paralyzed.

So Seth and I spent several days together, while I was there. And we talked, and we've been talking almost every day since I've been back. Now, I don't know if there is a real parallel to what John tells us here, but I had set aside some time to think about this paralytic man in John 5, and was suddenly presented with an emotionally paralyzed friend.

Sometimes reading the text alone draws up as many questions as it does answers. Many of the things I read about this story seem to have some inside knowledge about the paralytic: "He was giving excuses", "he was psychologically troubled", "his heart was stone after 38 years of failure". I don't know what was on his heart. Perhaps he was giving excuses, perhaps he was troubled, or perhaps he had a hard heart. What is recorded is that he was asked, "Do you want to be made well?" Now, he could have answered, "yes". Maybe he thought that was implied, based on where he was, and how long he had been there. And maybe therefore he thought an explanation was necessary. I'm often hyperaware of certain details, and lack the patience to bear with those less aware, and come off as a jerk. And similarly, many times I'm not aware when I should be, and beg the patience of those around me. I certainly lack the ability to read the paralytic's heart. For maybe this man had faith, being there 38 years in a hopeless situation (how would a paralytic ever be the first to enter?!). Maybe it wasn't obvious that he wanted to be healed, after all not all that are ill actually desire healing. Some may prefer the opportunity to duck responsibility, to complain, to have a pity party.

Maybe the question "Do you want to be made well?" is asked to draw attention away from the water, and onto the need for a man to help us, which is fulfilled in Christ himself becoming Man to heal all. (INCARNATIONAL) The paralytic's answer is that he's in need of a man. Now faith is not a theme of this section. Remember a few verses before, 4:48: Jesus says, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

Another friend I thought of is Edward. Now you may have seen Edward. In fact, if you were at street level, right now you would be in a possible Edward sighting area, which only spans a few blocks. Now, Edward was one of the first friends I made in Pittsburgh. I met him before I met many of you. Edward is not paralyzed but he is bound to a wheelchair. Now, just below our apartment around the corner, I saw Edward taking in the sun in the afternoon. And, traffic is going by. 61C is letting people off, and they are whizzing by, and Edward sits there and takes in the sun in the afternoons. So, I decided to introduce myself. Edward is in his early 80s. He's been in Squirrel Hill for a very long time. So through our conversations, which go very, very slowly, I've learned that he has a family, that he's Jewish, that he used to live in Boston and New York, that the Starbucks out my window used to be a Laundromat. This one bugs me because now the nearest Laundromat is nine blocks away. Edward is a model of patience to me. And I've learned so much from this man! He's been a real blessing to Rose and I. Get to know him if you see him around.

Thanks to the tradition of the church we can learn some things about this sign at the sheep gate pool. The festival of the Jews in verse one is said to be the Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. The five porticos mentioned are possibly symbolic of the Pentateuch. And later, we'll see the continuing saga of the Jews interpretation of the law, pit against Jesus as the fulfillment of it. The Sheep Gate was where the sacrificial lambs were washed before being sacrificed. Now the water here is indirectly related to the animal sacrifices of the temple, and limited in its effect on the physical healing of one person out of the multitude surrounding the pool, once an angel had stirred the water. In this way it is only a type or shadow of the Christian baptism. Our Christian

baptism is given to all nations, not just one out of a multitude. It is a direct participation in Christ's own death (according to Rom 6:3-6), without the mediation of angels.

Rom. 6:3-6 "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin."

Now, why would an angel be sent to stir the water? The church fathers teach that when Adam was expelled from Eden, he took with him two seeds of the Tree of Life. One was planted, and grew into the tree that later would become the wood of the cross, and there is a monastery there dedicated to the Holy Cross. The other seed was dropped accidentally, and the waters of a spring surfaced and immediately hid it. This pool became, in time, Bethesda, or the Sheep Pool. And, each year, an angel would descend and stir the water, seeking the seed. And this action of the angel, filled with grace, was strong enough to heal a blind, lame, or paralyzed person. Thus the crowd gathered...

Also, this pool was thought to be a fiction until 19th century, when excavations revealed it to be the same pool we read about here.

According to St. John Chrysostom, Jesus singled out the man who had waited 38 years to teach us to have perseverance, and as a judgment against those who lose hope or patience in lesser troubles lasting a shorter time.

Another paralyzed person I thought of is myself. Often, in life I have found myself paralyzed mentally, emotionally. In fact when I met Seth, years ago, I was at a low point. And when I met Edward, I was paralyzed as well, not knowing where to begin my life in Pittsburgh. And as I dig into the depth of my own sins, lusts, pride, that get in the way of prayer, I realize just how paralyzed I am. We are all paralyzed, and this story gives us hope in Christ. Thanks to his coming into this world, and becoming Man to heal us all.

The ancient vespers hymn about this refers to the paralytic as an unburied corpse or a dead man unburied. Now death is the ultimate paralysis. And we can overcome this with Jesus who has trampled down death by death!

Christ is Risen!

[Close with prayer thanking Jesus for coming into this world, for healing us, for offering himself and allowing us to join in his burial through baptism and his resurrection.]