

Sermon: For the Healing of the Nations

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts and questions of all of our hearts show your presence among us and be your light and love.

Two stories from Jerusalem. One, Jerusalem remembered. One a future Jerusalem. Both are stories of healing and new creation which is a good way to mark the final Sunday in this Season of Creation.

I'll start with the Gospel of John. The story we read from the 5th chapter is part of what some scholars refer to as the 7 signs of the Messiah. John is a very literary text. Its structure and repetition are important to the message which makes it a book that asks to be read slowly and often. It comes at us in layers and waves – and the 7 signs are part of that.

Water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

The healing of the official's son

The healing of this paralytic man at the pool.

Multiplying the loaves.

Walking on water.

The healing of the man born blind.

The raising of Lazarus.

These connect with the sacraments – water, bread and wine – and also with statements of Jesus' true identity. He is the living water, the bread of life, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life.

It is beautiful how John presents these deep truths poetically. And yet there is more going on in these stories than literary structure and poetry.

In each story, the signs only convince those who believe. Those who don't, push back. In the verse after our reading, there is a large fuss about the fact that this encounter happened on

the Sabbath. First the focus was on the fact that the man was carrying his mat on the Sabbath which would be work. Then, subsequently, that Jesus had done the work of healing.

I think it's fascinating that no one questions the healing only the timing of it.

But Jesus' answer to that is astonishing: My Father is still working, and I also am working.

But this, too, was seen as a mark against him. By calling God his Father, he seemed to be asserting equality with God. And that was too much for the authorities.

But let's return to the man who was healed.

Interestingly, we aren't told he is paralysed. The text says that there were many invalids: blind, lame and paralysed. *One man was there who had been ill for 38 years.* – and then a little later, we hear him explaining to Jesus that *while I am making my way, someone else steps down in front of me.*" The logistics seem to be a concern in this story. The man doesn't spell out the details of his need to Jesus, just offer his excuses and explanations as to why it's taking him so long in this "health care" system.

Also 38 is a weird number for John – specific but not neat – as I said to the children, almost 40, so almost in line with Biblical expectations. But here he is, outside the walls, looking for superstitious healing from an angel.

It would be neat here to talk about the pool at Bethzatha as a traditional place of healing or cleansing – A Jewish pool of purification – and there were such things – and I could bring in baptism imagery and make it tidy referring again to the sacraments, but I'm afraid there is something more complicated going on here. The pool is outside the city walls. Jesus was good at finding himself in places outside the city walls. Also Jewish oral tradition remembers this specific pool was dedicated to the Roman goddess Fortuna. So much for tidiness.

Fortuna was the goddess of fortune. She was depicted as veiled or blind – like Lady Justice, but not holding a scale. She did not bring balance but a rudder, representing the blunt fact that luck could be good or bad. Life is capricious. Homer referred to her as Automatia – tipping his laurel leaves to the fact that her gifts are arbitrary. She does not see the supplicant. She does not see the gift.

And it's at her pool that our story is set. We have the tradition of people gathering here, hoping for good luck yet luck – Fortuna herself – is blind.

And yet Jesus **sees** our friend, lying there. That's the strong verb in this story. He sees him and knows he has been there an almost Biblically long time. The man is seen. And then Jesus said to him "Do you want to be made well?"

It is a ringing question. I wonder if, as he fumbled his answer about logistics, the man saw himself for a moment. The question itself like a reflecting pool. Did he? Did he wonder what would being made well mean? How would it change him?

And then it happened. He was strengthened and made well. He picked up his mat. He stood on his own two feet. Then he looked around for Jesus but didn't see him. Jesus had slipped away through the crowd.

I've spent a lot of time this morning, circling this pool, so let's turn now to Revelation and see Jerusalem from another angle.

"And in the spirit, he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God."

And there was no Temple because God was there among the people. And there was no need of sun or moon because God was all light.

Light and life and water and not bread, but fruit growing from the tree of life.

All things will be made well. Jesus's question has found its completion. "Do you want to be made well?" This is what well looks like. The nations healed. The light ubiquitous. The water flowing. And growth and health and wholeness. It's a radical vision in any time. It feels especially poignant in times when we see so many images of destruction in the news, so much rubble in the shadows of Jerusalem.

I've been rereading the work of Thomas Merton recently. Merton was an American monk and writer. He was born during the First World War and died during the Vietnam War. Through his life, he struggled with questions of calling and wholeness and how to be who God made him to be. The book I've been reading is called *Thoughts in Solitude* and addresses questions of contemplation and prayer. It might be tempting to see these

thoughts as escapist, set against the turbulent twentieth century in which Merton was writing, but he is resolute in his commitment to the world and the spiritual health of its people. And it's clear that's why he writes.

This line stuck with me: "A man knows when he has found his vocation when he stops thinking about how to live and begins to live."

No more worries about logistics. He's heard his calling. He's been seen and known and called and can begin to live.

We don't need to be whole already. We don't need to have it all worked out. And we don't need to be lucky. God is not waiting for any of that to happen.

No, it's God's desire to see us – in our need, in all our paralysed states – and when we are seen and known and can answer, we are made well.

Stand up. Take up your mat. Walk. Amen.