



St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Message by Rev. Michael Burke

6th Sunday of Easter (May 22, 2022)

## Do you want to be made well?

That's the unsettling question that the Gospel of John brings us this morning.

Do you want to be made well?

The question come from the fifth chapter of John's Gospel, and the setting is this:

Jesus has been traveling throughout the region east of the river Jordan, and step by step revealing who he is through a series of "signs." First, he is in Samaria at the site of what traditions held to be "Jacob's well," and there he meets the Samaritan woman at the well. And he engages in a long dialogue in which he offers her "living water,"

<sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' (John 4:13-14)

She was a woman cast out from community, coming to the well at an hour long after the others have come, and Jesus reveals himself to her as the Messiah, the promised One of

God.<sup>1</sup> She leaves the encounter still a bit confused by what is literal and what is metaphor, but begins to tell everyone about this man, saying “<sup>29</sup>‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’”

And then Jesus goes to Cana in Galilee, where he had changed the water into wine. There he meets a royal official whose son lay ill some distance away in Capernaum. He had heard of Jesus’s signs, and came to beg him to heal his son.

<sup>48</sup>Then Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.’

<sup>49</sup>The official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my little boy dies.’ <sup>50</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’ The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. <sup>1</sup>As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. <sup>52</sup>So he asked them the

hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, ‘Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.’ <sup>53</sup>The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, ‘Your son will live.’ So the royal official himself believed, along with his whole household.

And now, in today’s Gospel, he comes to Jerusalem. It is the sabbath, and Jesus visits the pool at Beth-zatha, ( or *Beth hesda* (בֵּית חֶסְדָּא/כַּסְדָּא) where many with any number of disabilities or infirmities lay waiting for the waters to be “stirred up”, that they might be healed.

This pool has an interesting history. In the ancient world at the time of Jesus, there were several types of pools and baths. One type was built over geothermal vents in the

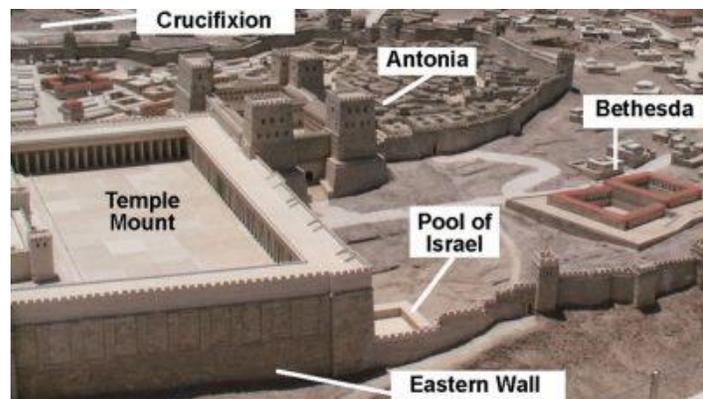


<sup>1</sup> “<sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’” John 4:25-26

bedrock. Groundwater would seep deep into cracks where it would percolate down through layers, dissolving and absorbing numerous minerals such as calcium carbonate, lithium, potassium, magnesium, zinc, phosphate, and various sulfates. When the water reaches a certain geothermal gradient, it is thrust back to the surface as steam at regular intervals, bubbling and “stirring the waters.” It was essentially an ancient version of what medical personnel today would call one big transdermal patch.

The climate of the ancient near east has changed significantly in the last two thousand years, and there is still much we don’t know about such springs around Jerusalem. In fact, for centuries, biblical scholars believed that this pool, cited by John, was a literary device and not an actual place. There was no evidence for such a place around Jerusalem, and John describes it elsewhere as having five porticos or columned porches, which implies a pentagonal structure, an architectural feature unknown in the region’s ancient archeology.

But then in 1888 a German archeologic team headed by Konrad Schick was excavating near the present-day location of the church of St. Anne outside the gates of the old city of Jerusalem, when they discovered what was once a deep underground reservoir



that had been built upon over the centuries. Schick was an archeologist who specialized in the irrigation and water systems of antiquity, and he was tracing the flow of water in ancient Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Under the rubble of previous destructions and occupations, under an ancient Roman temple, which was under a ruined church, which was under a destroyed mosque, which was under yet another church, (this gives you some sense of the historical cycles of conquest, loss, and reconquest of the Roman campaigns and later medieval

<sup>2</sup> See <https://conradschick.wordpress.com/archeology/pool-of-bethesda/> and even an 1888 news article about the discovery in a publication from New Zealand: <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18881208.2.64.21>.

crusades, doesn't it?)... . . . Below there were the remains of a huge cistern or pool that was an astonishing thirteen meters, or almost 40 feet deep, cut out of bedrock.

It was arranged in a large rectangle 120 feet long, divided into upper and lower pools by a horizontal wall, effectively creating five walls, each with its own porch or portico – not pentagonal, but just like John's Gospel described it!

So... back to the story... There was a man who laid there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus heard his story, he said to the man, "Do you want to be made well?"



*Pools of Bethesda*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The sick man said, "Sir, when the water is stirred, I don't have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in." <sup>8-9</sup> Jesus said, "Get up, take your bedroll, start walking." The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off."<sup>3</sup>

In the next few verses, which proceed beyond the end of the passage we read today, <sup>9-10</sup> That day happened to be the Sabbath. The religious leaders stopped the healed man and said, "It's the Sabbath. You can't carry your bedroll around. It's against the rules."

And then we are off and running on a whole new section about Jesus' growing conflict with the religious authorities, who he was, how God's work proceeds through him, how God works to bring wholeness and healing even on the Sabbath, etc., etc.

We can't do a whole bible study here in the time we have for today, but think about these few things.

When we ask the question, (or the preacher asks the question, "Do you want to be healed" – do you remember that question from the beginning of this sermon???) one

<sup>3</sup> From The Message paraphrase, John 5:7

place our minds go is to thoughts of merit. Do I really *deserve* to be healed? Is my faith great enough? Do I deserve it? Am I grateful enough for the things that I already have, let alone asking God for more? Shouldn't I have to work a little harder at this first?

Notice this: In contrast to some other places in the Gospel where Jesus heals, and there is some reference to their faith, "Go, your faith has made you well."<sup>4</sup> (Luke 7:50; Luke 17:19; Mark 5:34; or Matthew 8:13, Matthew 9:22, or Matthew 15:28. ) for instance...

In this passage, the man makes no profession of faith at all. Then, after he is confronted by the religious authorities, he snitches on Jesus and tries to blame the whole thing on him, and never once is said to have uttered a word of gratitude.

In other words, he is the poster child for "people who don't deserve to be healed" in all the ways in which our contemporary culture thinks about such things.

And yet... and yet... Jesus heals. God heals through Jesus. Despite the fact that it "breaks all the rules, both then and now." Go figure.

That gives me hope, my friends. That gives me courage. And that brings me to gratitude. We believe in a God that stirs the waters. Repeatedly. Thanks be to God!

The meaning of the name of that ancient pool, in Aramaic?

It means "house of grace" "house of mercy."

As if THAT doesn't underscore the message...

I'll leave it right there.

Be well. Be kind. Love One Another.

Keep Coming Back.

Amen.

Pools of Bethesda<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Luke 7:50; Luke 17:19; Mark 5:34; or Matthew 8:13, Matthew 9:22, or Matthew 15:28.

<sup>5</sup> See: Figure 1: "Pools of Bethesda," <http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/51-bethesda-pool.html>, accessed May 1, 2014.; and Wahle C. Von, Urban. "The Puzzling Pool of Bethesda. Biblical Archeology 65 (2011): 40-47.

## Scriptures Appointed for Today:

### The Collect

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

### The First Lesson - Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

### The Psalm - Psalm 67

1 May God be merciful to us and bless us, \*  
show us the light of God's countenance and come  
to us.

2 Let your ways be known upon earth, \*  
your saving health among all nations.

3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; \*  
let all the peoples praise you.

4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, \*  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide all the nations upon earth.

5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; \*  
let all the peoples praise you.

6 The earth has brought forth her increase; \*  
may God, our own God, give us God's blessing.

7 May God give us God's blessing, \*  
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of  
God.

## The Epistle - Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

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

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

## The Gospel - John 5:1-9

After Jesus healed the son of the official in Capernaum, there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha,<sup>6</sup> which has five porticoes. In these lay many who were blind, lame, or paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "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 steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

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<sup>6</sup> The term is "*Beth hesda* (בֵּית חֶסְדָּא)" in Hebrew and Aramaic, John is writing in Greek, and the term has been frequently corrupted or anglicized into Bethesda.