

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

May 22, 2022 – EASTER 6, YR. C /ROGATION SUNDAY

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*It’s Not about the Pool—It’s about Jesus*”

Acts 16:9-15	(Paul’s ministry is led by the Holy Spirit)
Psalms 67	(A prayer for God’s blessing, especially on the crops)
Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5	(The glories of heaven revealed)
St. John 5:1-9	(Jesus heals a man at the pool of Bethesda)

Thirty-eight years is a long time to sit on your mat. Every day is the same. Waiting. Watching. Hoping. Not much changes. Sitting on his mat has become a way of life for the man in today’s Gospel story. His life is stagnant. Convinced that life will bubble up outside of him, over there, in that magic pool of water, he’s unable to see the deep well of God-given life within him. So, he sits on his mat waiting, watching, and hoping things will change.

In Jesus’ time, there was a popular belief that the pool of water at Bethesda (or Beth-zatha, in Hebrew) had healing properties that could change one’s life. It was rumored that every now and then an angel would stir the water, it would begin to bubble, and the first person into the pool would be healed. The man whom St. John describes in today’s Gospel seems to need help getting up off his mat, but has he ever *asked* anyone to help him into the pool?

He seems to be living an, “as-soon-as,” life: “As soon as the water bubbles, someone will come and put me in the pool. My life will get better, and all my problems will be fixed.”

But the pool of Beth-zatha is an illusion we all encounter sooner or later. It’s that false dream, advertisement, or obsession which convinces us our life is nothing more than our circumstances. It deceives us into believing that life is to be found outside ourselves. It tricks us into living an “as-soon-as” life. We say to ourselves—or maybe even out loud to someone else—“As soon as [this or that happens] everything will get better. I’ll finally be happy. My troubles will go away. I’ll be satisfied, and everything will be alright.”

As it does for the sick man, the pool of Beth-zatha has a strong attraction for us, too. Children often say, “As soon as I grow up and become an adult . . .” Then it continues throughout our life. “As soon as . . .” I graduate, get a job, get a *better* job; I get married, or dump this relationship; I have more time, more money, a better house; he changes the way he acts; she asks my forgiveness, I feel better or get through this time in my life; they do what I want; I get a vacation, retire, move to a different state; I get over this grief; I lose ten pounds, get in shape; make better friends . . . and on, and on. “As soon as . . .” You can fill in the blank with almost anything. The problem is, there will always be another pool of Beth-zatha. Yet nothing outside of us can resolve our difficulties.

Real life, the fullness of life which God intends for us to experience, is put on-hold. We’ve pushed the pause button. We sit on our mat, self-imprisoned by the circumstances of our life. The imprisonment is so great for the man by the pool, when Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” the invalid doesn’t even answer, “Yes.”

Instead, he describes his circumstances and offers excuses. “I have no one to put me in the water. When the water bubbles others get there first.” People are always taking advantage of me. No one cares.

I’m not suggesting the circumstances of our lives are irrelevant or should have no effect on us. That’s simply not true. We *are* affected by what happens to us. However, God has created us to be more than what’s going on around us. Paradoxically, we can only find true life while living *in the midst of* our circumstances, because we can’t separate these from our lives. If we tried to do that, we’d be outwardly focused on the pool at Beth-zatha all over again.

What’s interesting about this healing story is that Jesus does not help the man get into the water. He comes to him on his mat, that same mat and situation the man so desperately wants to escape, and speaks words of life and resurrection: “Stand up, take your mat, and walk.” Notice, Jesus doesn’t say, “leave your mat behind.” It goes with the man, even in his changed and healed state, because his circumstances are real. The difference is, he now *carries them*. They no longer *carry him*.

Jesus doesn’t change our outer circumstances. He changes *us*. In the midst of whatever we are dealing with—no matter how difficult it seems—Jesus calls us into a new way of being, seeing, acting, speaking, and thinking. He calls us to believe in Him, to emulate Him, and to apply His teachings to our challenges. *And* He gives us the Holy Spirit to further assist and empower us.

When we stand and rise to that new life within, we discover that our circumstances actually seem to have somehow changed. That doesn’t necessarily make life easy, or mean we no longer have to deal with the hard situations of our lives. But saying “yes” to Christ’s invitation to new life in Him does make our circumstances more manageable, more bearable. We find we are engaging with them from a different place and position. The pool of Beth-zatha is drained of its power over us. There is freedom where there was once imprisonment. Inertia gives way to creativity. Once-stagnant waters now bubble with new life.

This life Jesus offers us does not happen “as soon as” It happens in this place, at this time, in these circumstances. Have you been sitting on your mat for too long? Are you looking for a pool of Beth-zatha? Have you been waiting forever for the magic bubbles? Turn your eyes upon Jesus, and hear what He says to you, and to me, today: “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”*

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, our Great Physician, heal us of our near-sighted failure to perceive that true life comes from You. Give us grace to hear Your voice and follow Your direction, even in the midst of our present circumstances, over which we feel we have no power and no one can help us, but You. Grant us strength and courage to stand, take up our mats, and walk—with You. *Amen*.

* Adapt. Michael K. Marsh, “Get Up Off Your Mat,” 6 May 2013, interruptingthesilence.com, <<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2013/05/06/get-up-off-your-mat-a-sermon-on-john-51-9/>> 17 May 2022. Used with permission.