

God is Not a Machine

a sermon on John 5: 1-18

Today's gospel reading is one that I'm going to suggest you might want to follow along with in your pew bibles. We are reading the story of the healing of the paralytic found in the gospel according to John, chapter 5, verses 1 through 18. (I'm going a little farther than I thought when I was putting the bulletin together.)

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Thy sight O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer.*

If you were reading along in your bible as I was reading,
you probably noticed something, or rather a lack of something.
But no, I did not make up all that business
about the angel troubling the water
and the tradition of the first person into the pool being healed.

Biblical scholars have noted that
verse 4 isn't in the very oldest of the manuscripts of John's gospel,
though it does come in rather early and the earliest commentators that we have reflect
the understanding of these lines in their writings.

And that has continued throughout the centuries,
though now in most modern bibles verse 4
is relegated to some sort of footnote,
and the text skips from verse 3 to verse 5
(without passing Go or collecting 200 dollars).

So, if you think that line makes the story too weird,
you probably have a bit of trouble with the Bible,
but in this case, you do have some grounds for ignoring it.

I think it is kind of cool and explains things, so humor me.

For all the symbology and theology in John,
the pool he mentions in today's reading does correspond to a real thing
that we know something about.

To orient yourself you might want to take a look at the last map
in the back of your pew Bibles - page 1546.

The Sheep Gate and the pool of the Bethesda show up in the northeastern corner.
You can see from how it is drawn in the map
that this pool is actually two pools.
And they were huge.

The map may not give you a good idea of the scale,

God is Not a Machine

but each of those pools is a little bigger than
an olympic sized swimming pool.

The dividing wall between the two is around 20 feet wide,
and the whole thing was roughly the size of a football field
- minus the end zones.

Within the dividing wall are channels
used for transferring water from the northern pool,
which was a reservoir of sorts, into the southern pool,
used for ritual washing.

There was the idea that moving water was better for religious uses,
which does make a certain amount of sense:

Water that isn't moving is more likely to be stagnant and nasty.

And when water was moved from one pool to the other,
the physics of it promote bubbling movement.
[So if you really insist on getting rid of the angel,
this is how you can explain it away].

There have been various ideas posited about just what these pools were used for.
The primary purpose does not seem to have been healing.

The two main theories both connect with Temple worship.

1. Either it was a place to wash the lambs people would bring to sacrifice,
2. or it may have been for the people to wash themselves
and render them ritually clean so that they could go up to the Temple,
which as you can see was really close by.

I realize both ritual cleanliness and animal sacrifice
are foreign ideas to our modern Protestant minds,
and I'm just going to refrain from trying to explain them.

But these matters were important in the Judaism of Jesus' time,
and whether you are washing a lamb or yourself in the pool,
it was part of what prepared and enabled you
to approach the presence God and worship Him.

The suggestion that this pool was a *Miqveh*
- the place for the ritual washing of people -
might seem undercut by the olympic size of the thing,
as such pools were usually only big enough and only held water enough
to immerse one person.

God is Not a Machine

But this is Jerusalem,

and maybe this was needed for the tens of thousands of pilgrims
that would come for the Jewish festivals,
as Jesus is doing in today's gospel reading. (It is Pentecost by the way).

[There's even a story in one of the apocryphal fragment of something
in which Jesus makes use of such a pool,
though the way it is described sounds suspiciously like
Christian baptismal practices,
but not without reason].

In fact, I'm going to double down on some of the connections to baptism here.

But not because there is water involved,
but because paralytic stood up.

The resurrection themes in this passage are strong,
it's very appropriate for the easter season.

Whatever, whomever, was supposed to be washed here, there is also a healing tradition
associated with the pool according to the gospel account.

When the angel troubles or stirs up the waters,
or the same effect is caused by letting fresh water into the southern pool,
the water takes on healing properties,
but only for the first person to get into the water.

This seems to be one of those incredibly unfair scenarios in which those worst off,
like the paralytic with no one to help him,
are pretty much screwed.

As it turns out, not only is this healing pool tradition/superstition limited in its abilities,
but it seems based on theological misunderstandings
that John wants to correct in the telling of this story.

In this account, the pool doesn't do anything other than provide scenery... and context.

The pool doesn't heal the man.

Jesus does.

In today's reading from Revelation we hear about living waters, and their true source.

And that source, sorry to say, is not an angel stirring a pool of water.

The true source is the Lamb, Christ.

Where a lot of the meat comes is in the dialogue

- especially this interaction between Jesus and the paralytic.

I don't like trying to read dialogue in the scriptures.

I actually think I might prefer those dreaded passages
with all the hard-to-pronounce names.

God is Not a Machine

Usually it is a good thing to be expressive when reading,
and especially with dialogue, even if you're not attempting to do voices,
there's all sorts of questions on stress and phrasing.

And these choices tend to be so interpretive.

I tried to be neutral and ambiguous, and boring.

But let's think about some of the possibilities of how Jesus asked the question:

- **Do** you want to be healed? What is taking you so long? 38 years -really??
- Do you **want** to be healed? You might not actually want this, you have a chance to back out.
- Do **you** want to be healed? Is this something you yourself want, or are you here out of the expectations of others?
- Do **you** want to be healed? I'm offering healing, but haven't had many takers. Turns out a lot of people aren't interested.

And what about the Paralytic's response?

It is interesting that the he doesn't give a straight answer.

He doesn't say yes.

He doesn't say no, either.

And what he does say can be interpreted in any number of ways:

"I have no one to help me"

Is that a:

"I'm so desperate I didn't even listen to your question,
I say the same thing to everyone who will listen.
The problem is I need help getting into the pool."

Or is he angry? or indignant?

"I have no one to help me, what do you expect from me?!"

Is he merely making excuses for himself?

"If only I had a someone to help me I wouldn't still be in this state.

Do you have any idea how unfair this pool is?!

All these other jerks keep stepping over me, not even giving me a chance."

...Well, Jesus doesn't condemn him, why should I?

Maybe he is ashamed, and embarrassed - too embarrassed to ask for help out right.

Maybe it is a barely audible

"I have no one to help me, and I can't do it on my own"

And which one of those is worse?

God is Not a Machine

to admit he can't get into the pool on his own?
or to admit his lack of recourse?

Does no one like him?

Has he been disowned by family and friends?
Have they given up on him?

Is he falling into despair?

"I have no one, therefore I know that I'm never going to be healed.
There's little sense entertaining the fantasy"

But he's still there at the pool, hoping without having reason to.

Doubtless, there are yet other ways to read these lines.

If any of those possibilities resonated with you, great, be attentive to that,
but know that it probably has more to do with you than
what the apostle John is trying to tell his readers about Christ.

This story, as with many others is the gospel in miniature.

God, in Christ, comes to his own people, to Jerusalem itself,
to save them, restore them, bring them back into his own image
...only of course to be rejected and plotted against.

There is a sense in which all humanity is there in the paralytic.

The great problems of humanity set out in the scriptures,
from the Adam's Fall and onward, were seen to have left us spiritually paralyzed,
with something not quite right and natural in our souls,
and unable to do much about it.

Our free will abused to the point that it isn't even free, but a slave to our desires, emotions, etc.

But Jesus comes respecting our freedom and asking for our consent and cooperation.

It is important that Jesus asks the question.

The pool itself and the angel that stirs it don't care.
Their healing is more mechanical.
With Christ it is personal.

Jesus is one to have such respect for a person as a person with free will.

Even in the sorry state this man is in and has been in for thirty-eight years
does not diminish his personhood, his dignity.

And he doesn't tell him

"Nope, you've got to wait two more years to make it an even forty.
It is just so much more symbolic."

Actually the thirty-eight year mark for the Israelites wandering in the wilderness

God is Not a Machine

was a point when the new generation had to make the choice for themselves to seek out the promised land, so it is actually really appropriate. It is that moment, again.

And then Jesus gives the command: get up, pick up your mat and walk.
Terribly unreasonable commands to address to someone who cannot get up, much less carry his own bed.
But at this command, the man does get up, because he was healed, instantly.
He didn't even get wet.
And he didn't even know who had done this for him.
In this case, it is not his faith or his belief in Christ that has made him well.
It is Christ himself.

The man didn't expect things to happen this way.
He probably didn't expect anything at all,
aside from someone else getting to the stirred pool before he could.
But the healing he hoped for was supposed to be this manipulation of God's power worked through the angel by doing the prescribed thing of getting into the water first.

But God doesn't always work in ways we expect.
When the former paralytic is questioned about his bed-carrying activities that surely go against Sabbath laws,
this disjunction appears again.

The pharisees don't seem to even hear the part about how this man had been healed, but zero in on the crime of bed-carrying.
How could the power of God be at odds with the law of God?

It's a similar wrong idea about how God works,
and how God can be manipulated through their legalism.
If only you can do the right things, God will be pleased with you.

But God isn't a machine.
But the one who helps you get up
even when you can't,
even when you have no other recourse.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*