

Called to Serve

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
John 5:1-9

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Mother, and from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

For *thirty-eight years* he sat there by the pool. Day after day, through sunshine and rain and wind and heat, he remained stuck in that same spot, paralyzed by his pain.

Jewish families who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year would see him sitting in the exact same spot each and every time they arrived. Across those thirty-eight years, they watched as his hair turned from black to grey, as his skin became leathery in the sun, as he grew thinner and weaker with age.

This unnamed man gained somewhat of a reputation throughout Jerusalem; everybody knew him, but nobody could save him.

Until one day...Jesus, another relatively unknown man, approached him at the pool and asked simply, "Do you want to be made well?"

Now what kind of a question was that?? Sick and alone for *thirty-eight years*, his whole life had become a reminder of the terrible, dehumanizing effects of illness. For travelers, his aging face had become for them a symbol of human depravity and pain. He was known only by his sickness. Nobody even knew his name. Perhaps he had forgotten it himself. And yet Jesus asks him, "Do you *want* to be made well?"

Well...do you? Do you *want* to be made well?

During seminary, I worked part-time as a chaplain at Bridgeport Hospital in Connecticut. Bridgeport was not the biggest hospital in the region, but it was the hospital with the best burn unit. Victims of horrible burn injuries were airlifted to us, where highly skilled nurses and doctors did everything they could to save them.

For some reason that was never explained to me, the chaplain's overnight room was located ON the burn unit, so I slept alongside these patients and their tireless caregivers night after night. I will never forget the smell of singed flesh that hovered over the unit, nor will I forget the compassion of the brave nurses who dutifully attended to their bodies and their spirits.

On my very first shift as a chaplain, I visited with one of the unit's newest patients. His name was Luis. Luis worked for a power company, and one day something went horribly wrong and he was badly electrocuted from head to toe. Both of his legs and one of his arms needed to be amputated. The rest of his body was completely wrapped in bandages. Luis's mother was there at his side every day, and so we would often pray together. His family had a strong faith, and in this terrible time it was all they had left to stand on.

But late into the night, long after his faithful family members had left, a nurse would often come and get me and ask me to sit with Luis. Sometimes we would pray. Mostly we would watch Animal Planet on TV. Always, Luis would cry. The future he had imagined for himself was gone. Life would never be the same.

Nearly two years later, on my last day on the job, I stopped by Luis's room for one final visit. I'll never forget the enormous smile Luis wore across his face because that morning, the hospital told him that he could go home.

For almost two years he had been in that hospital, healing and gaining strength, and now it was time to go home. He showed me pictures of the state-of-the-art prosthetic legs he planned on getting, and I watched in amazement as he slowly shifted himself from his bed into his new wheelchair. His mother was there, and she was crying tears of joy. We prayed, and he was on his way home.

For two years, Luis had become known at Bridgeport Hospital not only for the horrible pain and injuries he endured, but for the resilience of spirit he possessed. Watching him leave that hospital was one of the most miraculous things I've ever witnessed.

But what was the miracle? Well, I think it was Luis's courage and faith to live into a new story, a story that God was preparing for him. The miracle was the faith to believe that a new life, a new story, was possible.

"Do you want to be made well?" Jesus asks. "Then stand up, take your mat, and walk."

Of course, not everyone who journeys with illness or disease has a story that ends like Luis's, or like the nameless man in John's gospel. But hear this word of hope: Jesus meets us wherever we may sit, stuck in our pain or fear or anger or illness, and he calls us into a new future, a new story.

When that nameless man stood up in response to Jesus' command, those who saw it also witnessed a miracle. Of course, they had never before seen such an instantaneous healing, so that must have been exciting.

But what changed their *hearts*, what deepened their faith, was the sight of a man they had watched for *thirty-eight* years stepping boldly into an unknown

and different life. One who had once been alone and stuck in place was now trusting fiercely in a future formed by the promises of God.

So, "Do you want to be made well?" Do we, as the body of Christ, want to be made well? What piece of our life together longs for healing? What is the new story that God is calling us to, both individually and collectively?

Because...we can get stuck too, can't we? Especially in the church, we can easily hitch our anxieties to a story of decline and death. It's easy for us to imagine a future that looks bleak. It's easy to imagine a story that's not half as bright as the story we've already lived in the past.

And if we stay stuck in our own fear, our own pain, we, like that man at the pool, might even begin to forget that we *do want* to be made well. We might forget that a different story is possible. We might forget that God has already promised to be with us in life and in death, that we already have new life in Christ, that we are a people of hope!

We might even forget that God is calling us still, today, to the task of boldly bearing the good news of God's redeeming love to the whole world.

I have already heard so many amazing stories of what Christ the King has meant to so many of you, whether you joined this church in 1961 or earlier this year! And that gives *me* hope. The story of God's good news that has poured out from this place through the years makes me so excited for what is to come.

We are not a people that get stuck; God is calling us – yesterday, today, and tomorrow – to be God's people in and for the sake of the world!

So then...if we are to continue living boldly into God's story, where might such a story lead us? What will Christ the King look like *thirty-eight* years from today? Well...I'm not entirely sure!

But did you hear the words from Revelation that we heard read just a few minutes ago? Here we have a vision of God's people at the end of time, when all of creation is at last fully reconciled to God and to itself.

Now I must confess I do feel a little bit awkward bringing up Revelation when preaching about the church, especially as we're currently in the midst of a capital appeal here. Because at the very end of the Bible, in the vision of this completely reconciled people...there *is no church!* In the holy city at the end of time, there is no temple, no Christ the King, no Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

So what is there instead of church? Well, there is God dwelling with us. There is a river that glimmers like crystal, whose waters are free for all people to drink! There is a tree whose fruits feed the whole world and whose leaves heal the

nations! In this city, none of us worries about scarcity or decline. We do not compete with one another for resources or status.

Instead, we see the face of God. And we see the name of God written on the faces of our neighbors, that we might know in our hearts through faith that each and every person is wholly and uniquely created in the image of their Creator.

My friends, we do not live in that holy city in Revelation yet. But hear this: because of the Good News of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we are called to live together in the truth and hope of what it promises! By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this is the story that must fuel our imaginations for ministry in God's world. We are called to be an unstuck people. We are called to bless one another. We are called to serve one another.

And, we are called to be made well, over and over again.

So let us stand up, pick up our mats, and walk together. God has promised to be with us, and God's promises never fail.

Amen.