

EASTER VI

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids-- blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. John 5:2

My earliest memories are of waiting by the side of the pool. Lying in the entry to the pool area, because those gateways were the only places of shade. When I was small my mother would carry me there in the morning, and lay me down on my pallet, and wait with me.

We waited for the waters of the pool to stir themselves, the sign that the underground spring was welling up with its healing properties. The surface of the pool would ripple, and then a ripple of excitement would spread through the waiting crowd, and people would rush forward.

And the quickest would get there first, of course, the most able. And only a few would get there every day, would get to the head of the crowd and plunge into the balm of those waters before the wellspring would subside and the pool would become still and stagnant again.

My mother was never quick enough. I wonder, sometimes, if she really tried to get me there. I wonder if perhaps she was comforted, in some motherly way, by having a son so dependent on her, a son who could not grow strong and independent and go out to do the punishing work of a field laborer, the work my father did. My illness kept me close to her.

Once I grew too big for my mother to carry me, my father or my older brother would take me to one of the gates every day, and lay me down there with my pallet. But they couldn't stay with me – they had to get to their work in the fields. They wouldn't even stay with me on the Sabbath, because they were fearfully observant men and believed that hanging about the pool and then pushing through the desperate crowd might look too much like work.

So they would take me and leave me every day, and then come in the evening to collect me. What did they think, I wonder? Could they possibly have imagined that some stranger would, out of the kindness of his heart, pick me up and barge with me through the crush? Who would do that, I ask you? It was every man for himself at that pool.

They never said so, but I think my father and brother were embarrassed to have an invalid in the family. My mother may even have been mortified as well. Because it was believed that illness and deformity were the result of sin. Either I must have done something wrong – sinned before I was even born, because I was sick from birth – or they must have sinned in some unwitting way. In any event, it was shameful to have a chronically ill child.

So they left me there all day, every day, winter or summer, rain or shine. Talk about lonely! Talk about miserable! Most of the time I lay there wishing that some kind stranger would pick me up, take me to the edge of the pool, and just drop me in. I would sink like a stone. I would die in those waters meant for healing. I would be beyond pain and sorrow and suffering forever.

But nothing like that happened. Year in and year out I lay there waiting, waiting without hope. My life was one long grey tunnel of living death.

And then one day, one Sabbath it was, after my brother had dropped me off and gone off to make a sacrifice at the Temple, a stranger appeared. I mean, strangers were always appearing, but strangers with something wrong with them. A withered arm, or leprosy, or a bleeding, or a ranting demon, or a palsy. They came and came, the lame, the halt, and the blind.

But this stranger was different. He was young, and strong, and seemed filled with an energy and purpose that drew everyone's attention before he even spoke.

He looked around. And then he came over to me. To me, lying there on the ground under the porch. *Do you want to be healed?* he asked me.

Did I want to be healed? Of course I want to be healed, I said. Well, I almost said it. I thought it. I was going to say it. I was going to throw the question back at him. DO I WANT TO BE HEALED?? WHAT DO YOU THINK?

But something stopped me from screaming that question at him with all the pent up fury and bone-deep irony of 38 years. Because what happened to me was, my whole life suddenly flashed before my eyes. They say that happens when you know you're going to die suddenly. And I have to tell you that I felt as if I was about to die.

Because what flashed before my eyes was 38 years of lying there. 38 years of waiting. 38 years of never begging my mother to run, run with me to the front of the line. 38 years of never asking my father or brother to stay with me so that they could bear me forward in their arms made strong by years of hard labor. 38 years of never telling them, *well then just throw me in and be rid of me, I know you want to*. 38 years of never daring to ask a stranger to help me. 38 years of not ever dragging myself forward, inch by humiliating inch, to the edge of the living water.

38 years of just lying there. *So, did I want to be healed?*

I guess the man – I know now he was called Jesus – saw that I was dumbfounded. He didn't ask me anything more. He just said, *Stand up, take your mat and walk*. And all at once, I was made well, and I took my mat and began to walk.

It was that quick. I was healed! It was that simple. Well, maybe not. After all, I had been waiting 38 years. But something happened when Jesus came on the scene, and noticed me, and paid attention, and encouraged me – strongly encouraged me, I might say *ordered me*, to take charge of myself. And suddenly I wanted to, suddenly I could, suddenly I did.

Now that day was a Sabbath.

So not only did the man Jesus do what he did: notice me, pay attention to me, and encourage me. He broke religious law. He defied religious authority. He risked his standing and his safety. And ultimately, as he continued down the path he was on, he risked his life, and lost it.

My life is very different now. Of course I can walk, that's different. I work in the fields alongside my brother, and I feel proud that I can earn and help support my family. Because I have a family, I have a wife and a daughter to care for now.

But something else is different as well. I am much more self-reliant, but I am also more reliant on others, in different ways. Now, when I need help with something, I'm not afraid to ask. Because Jesus helped me, somehow I've learned to trust and to believe that others in my community will help me too, if they know I need them. And you know what? They do.

What happened that day? I'll never understand completely. But whatever happened, I've learned to call it *love*. The love of Jesus.

In just a few moments now we will welcome Oliver Miles Dean into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. His parents and sponsors will make many promises on his behalf. And we will too. What we will promise him, in short, is this.

NO POOL

NO LINES

NO WAITING

JESUS.

JESUS, and ourselves.

Alleluia! Amen