

“38 Years On The Verge”

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Text: John 5; 1-9

Archaeologists in their excavations in Jerusalem have discovered on the north side of the temple area, near what used to be called “the sheep gate,” the remains of an ancient pool about 150’ by 300’. Apparently the pool was fed by an intermittent spring that occasionally rippled the waters and which was believed to possess curative powers. The ill were brought there and placed into the pool when the waters were disturbed.

The scene by the pool might have resembled the emergency ward at one of our hospitals on a hectic Saturday night. Probably it was to this natural medical center that Jesus gravitated in the story recorded in John 5. As was so typical of him, he sought out the afflicted person whose case was the most tragic. This man had been waiting at the edge of the pool for 38 years. Someone brought him and took him home each day but no one was there to put him into the pool at just the right moment...38 years of waiting!

How much of life is spent in some kind of waiting...waiting for the right moment, the right set of circumstances, the right feeling.

- WAIT until I feel better, then I will really be out there getting things done.
- WAIT until I am more financially secure than I will leave my job and do something I really enjoyed.
- WAIT until I get out from under my parent’s thumb then I will really experience life.

A religious dimension is added when people assume that someday God is going to break into their lives and make things come alive. Some even go as far as to say, “If only I can endure this life, then I will get the rewards of the hereafter.”

People on the verge, people living in terms of what might have been or what they hope will be. How many people do you know in that category? What about yourself? So often human beings are caught up in the same pattern as the man by the pool. Life lived always on the verge.

A careful study of Jesus’ ministry reveals a great concern for those who seem to be missing the joyous exclamation of the psalmist that “this is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it together.” It’s what might be called having “a resurrection feeling” every day. People encountered Jesus in the New Testament in very ordinary circumstances: at the pool, on the way to the village well, at work fixing fishing nets. Always the encounters have the same emphasis: suppose while you are waiting and watching and ruing all “the might have beens” in your life you already are in the presence of a Power that could dynamically and drastically make your life more satisfying?

I heard of a woman who in middle life decided to return to the church. She said there was a lot of talk about salvation and repentance and life after death, all of which she knew were important. However, she found herself saying, “What does this have to do with my life while rushing to get dinner, taking the kids here and there and all that ‘stuff?’” She didn’t want religious jargon but a sense of the presence of the Almighty in the midst of her mundane daily routine. She wanted to get into the pool of vibrant water! It may be that the book “The Purpose Driven Life” has become a best seller because it spells out what a person can do each day to make life more of a partnership with the Almighty.

The whole of Jesus’ ministry was directed toward people like that woman. The Gospel of John says that our Lord frequently spoke of bringing “Living Water” and sought to help men and women move into the bubbling spring of God’s love! What the man at the pool and the woman in her kitchen want to know is whether this is just talk or can this “Water” be part of each day?

The answer to the question begins with another question: “Are you sure that you want to step into the waters?” A strange comment but that is exactly what Jesus was getting at when he asked the man at the pool, “Do you want to be made well?” Initially that sounds like a ridiculous statement. Does Jesus think he has been waiting 38 years for the fun of it? Our Lord, as was often the case, was probing beneath the surface. He knew how easy it was to go through the motions. Perhaps the man had forgotten his original desire and was merely doing what was expected of him.

We come seeking to strengthen our religious faith but do we really expect to discover the healing force of God's power as a daily and on-going reality or is worship more of a routine like sitting on the edge of the pool? Are we working to make the promises of scripture come true in our lives or are we just plodding along? Soren Kiergaard, the Danish philosopher, wrote, "A man may know all about swimming; he may have read books on swimming and indeed may be an expert on the subject and have taught others to swim. But until he actually goes into the water, until he actually leaves the edge of the pool and jumps into the water, he does not know how to swim."

We are asked to jump in which may mean different things to different people. Nevertheless always we are called to leave this place of worship and live out our religious feelings and commitments. I do not know how many of you have been in the worship center at Gates Presbyterian. It is in the round with the communion table in the center. The design originally had a fifty foot cross on the outside that came through a skylight into a shaft of light above the table. There was no cross on the inside but the outside cross theologically symbolized that one finds the roots of faith in the worship center but true faith is lived out in the world. Unfortunately, that architectural imagery, maybe like our lives, could not stand the pressures of the world, particularly the west wind, and 15 years after construction it had to be taken down. The cross literally had a stress fracture! Nothing better portrays the movement of faith: we have to practice what we believe 7 days a week, that's stepping into the pool. And there surely will be some stresses and strains and that's why we regroup each Sunday morning.

"Jump in" can be a scary command. Think of a child learning to swim. Think of all the people who learned to swim in Roth's pool. Think of the man at the pool. How frightened he must have been in responding to Jesus. After all he hadn't moved on his own for 38 years. We may feel equally apprehensive when we contemplate what God is asking us to do. But remember the man was able to respond because for the first time in 38 years he had someone to stand by his side. He gained confidence through the presence of Jesus. By the same token, we are not alone as we venture forth this week. God not only calls us to move ahead but also supplies the strength to enable us to do so.

"Do you want to be healed?" Jesus was asking about more than just physical well-being. Always being made whole involves the totality of the human condition and how life in all of its ramifications might be lived more fully. The possibility is there. God's loving power can move within us and within the world.

This is not the time for wishes. This is not the time to procrastinate. This is not the time for "If only" thoughts. Right now in the midst of whatever life is for us we need to step into the pool with confidence and joy knowing that Christ himself bids us come.