



Resurgence: Finale

John 5:2-9

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This morning we conclude our Resurgence worship series as the season of Easter wanes to a close. Over the coming couple weeks we will rejoice the ascension of Christ to the right hand of God in heaven, and celebrate the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. Over the past month, we have seen how the resurrection offers new life and new faith to all who encounter the power of the risen Christ. Not only did the physical presence of the resurrected Christ offer new life and faith to the early believers, but the power of the resurrection continues to offer new life and faith to the church post ascension and post Pentecost.

Throughout the history of the church, we have continued to see the power of the resurrection call the church to renewed life and faith. Through seasons of transition at the highest levels, to the call for renewal at the local level, the church has continually been empowered to gain new life and new faith.

Last week, Rev. Lindsey Baynham was here to lead and preach. I appreciated her words on the text from Revelation. I've been thinking through her words a lot this week, focusing in on one specific phrase. She offered, "God *is not only* in the work of offering new life," that is, not only in the process of creating life, "but, God *is also* in the work of making all things new." From the moment humanity was banished from the perfection of creation in the Garden, God has been working to restore us to the perfect image of God in which we were first created.

From the installation of the first covenant, to the leadership of the Kings and Prophets, to the New Covenant of grace established in Christ, God has continually sought to not only create new things, but also to create anew that which was dead, broken, and suffering. If we ever think that we have managed to perfect our faith, to have perfectly figured out God's will, to know beyond the shadow of a doubt the fullness of God's desire for us, we *are not* at that moment at a place of needing renewal, we are well beyond the place where renewal of life and faith are needed. As Russell Crowe offered in the movie *Gladiator*, "If you find yourself alone, riding in green fields with the sun on your face, do not be troubled; for you are in Elysium, and you're already dead!" If you think you've got all the answers, are perfected, and are fully living into God's will, rest easy, for you have likely already entered the kingdom of Heaven. As we're still sitting here in the flesh today, it's quite clear, you and I are not there. We are not there *yet*. God has not fully ushered in the glorious kingdom, and there is still a need for renewal of life and faith.

How then, as those who are continually in need of renewal, do we encounter the power of resurrection that we may receive a resurgence of life and faith? How does God bring about a new thing in our lives? How do we live in to what is next for us as a people of faith? We can

learn a lot from today's text in John, which offers us a glimpse of how Christ brings about new life.

The story is set at a pool in Jerusalem. Historians believe they have found this very pool, now located beneath other buildings (which over the past 2000 years have been constructed over the pools). Visiting the site today, you can still find the five porticos giving entrance and structure to the pools. This was not just a place for bathing, or a spa for relaxation. The pools offered a promise of healing.

The knowledge of the healing pools at Beth-zeda is widespread. In a story of their own telling, the National Institutes for Health offer that in the 1930s, when President FDR was looking for a site to establish the National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Maryland rose into contention. When Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt's closest advisors, reminded the president of the story from John 5, which tells the story of the healing power of the pools at Beth-zeda, Bethesda's namesake, Roosevelt made the decision to locate the NIH in Bethesda.

It was widely believed the pools were dedicated to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.ⁱ And there is in our Biblical text a bit of guidance as to how the healing took place. I want us to read that verse together. ...

Do me a favor, pull out your pew Bible. Open up to John, chapter 5, verse 4 – which is on page 96 of the New Testament. (I'll give you a minute, go ahead, open it up.) ...

Do you notice anything odd about verse 4? It's missing! In almost every translation of the Bible, you'll find that verse 4 is not printed in line with the rest of the text. Instead, it's added at the bottom of the page as a footnote. This verse was not part of the original Greek text, but was added at a later date. It's believed to have been added because people were confused by verse 3 ... why had so many invalids gathered at the pools? So, verse four offers (and let's read it together), "Sometimes an angel would come down to the pool and stir up the water. Then the first one going into the water after it had been stirred up was cured of any sickness."

This auxiliary text says an angel came down; historical accounts of this pool claimed it was not an angel of the Creator God, but an angel of the Greek god of healing, Asclepius. People gathered not to encounter the resurrecting power of the Lord God, but the claimed healing of a Greek god. The only problem being that, after the angel came down and stirred up the waters, the only person who would be healed was the *first* person to enter the pool. So, at this pool sat the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed, hoping that at some time, following the stirring up of the pool waters by the angel, they could be the first to enter. Day in and day out these invalids, as the text calls them, sat hoping that the Greek god of healing would give them a new life.

Only, there was a problem in this promise. Everytime the water was stirred, everyone who was present rushed into the pools. Only the first person to enter after the water was stirred received the gift of healing.

Jesus comes up on the pool at Beth-zeda and there he finds a man who had been ill for 38 years. We're not told exactly how many of those 38 years he had been sitting at the poolside, but we're the text seems to suggest he had been there for a long while. In fact, perhaps due to the omnipotence of God, Jesus knew that the man had been there for a long time. Approaching him, Jesus asks him, "Do you want to be well?"

This question of Jesus is something of a challenge. Did he really believe that the man didn't want to be well? That would be like asking a person begging for money outside of a restaurant, "Do you want to eat?" Or perhaps asking a person who lives on the streets, "Do you want a place to sleep indoors?" Or even asking a parent who has an estranged child, "Do you want to see your child again?" These questions, and any like them, toxically rest up against the assumption that someone who is struggling, who is ill, or who has little or no resources at their discretion, are the way they are because of a lack of *desire* for life to be any different.

The man responds, perhaps unlike we might have first expected. He doesn't simply say to Jesus, "yes, *I want* to be made well." Instead, he explains why he has not already been made well. "Sir," the man offers, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

His response calls attention to the problem, which is not his lack of desire for health. The problem isn't a lack in the man's will or even his ability to acknowledge his present situation. The problem is that in this pool, only the first shall be healed. One would think that with such miraculous healing powers, there would be no invalids, poor, blind, or lame left at the pool. Yet, every time the waters are stirred, someone else beats the invalids into the water. The system is not set up to offer healing to the very people who need it most. When the waters are stirred, everyone, able and unable, moves to the pools to receive whatever gift of healing there may be available regardless if they need the healing or not ... and regardless the status, health, or needs of those around them.

The man's response makes it clear, his lack of health is not the result of a lack of will, it's a lack of ability ... it's a lack of circumstance ... it's a lack of care from the community around him. He can't physically get into the waters he believes he needs to be healed. "The fact that for thirty-eight years the man has languished, without assistance, indicts his society, not him."ⁱⁱ

And there Jesus stands, as God's agent of new life. "God's agent seeks out precisely those *without* the ability to help themselves, those who are neglected and bypassed by others: those who are dying, who cannot see, or cannot walk."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus doesn't seem to pause at the man's response. He speaks, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Verse 9 confirms the power of Christ, "At once," it says, "at once, the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk."

Without needing to enter the waters, without needing someone's assistance to get into the pools, Jesus offers the man the healing he has for so long desired.

To understand how Jesus' action here at the pools of Beth-zeda teach us about God's healing, and the gift of new life, we have to first acknowledge an oddity about this text. There is *no* indication in this text that the man knew Jesus. In fact, if we keep reading in John 5, we find in verse 13, the text verifies, this man had no clue who Jesus was. He did not know the identity of the man who had healed him. As he did not know Jesus, the text offers no indication that the man had anything that could be defined as "faith" in Christ as the Son of God, or in God at all. He was, remember, at a pool for a Greek god seeking healing, not hanging around the temple hoping for a miracle by God.

So, we must first acknowledge that faithfulness is not a necessity to receive God's gift of new life. God, through Jesus Christ, offers new life to everyone. "If ever we are tempted to think that God's healing depends on the quality or quantity of a person's faith, this passage offers a strong corrective. The man who Jesus heals shows no sign of faith in Jesus or of gratitude for what Jesus has done for him."^{iv}

If Jesus' healing, if the gift of new life, is not about rewarding those who have faith, what is Jesus' work all about? I want to go back to Rev. Baynham's comment from last week – God is not just creating new things, God is working to make all things new.

"[Jesus'] action has the symbolic significance – both then and now – of bypassing and challenging systems that seemingly grant equal opportunity to everyone but do not ensure equal access. Without the latter, the former seems meaningless, especially when coupled with the obstacles that prevent some from becoming whole."^v Jesus is not interested in saving a few at the expense of the masses. Jesus is not playing favoritism to the wealthy and powerful. Jesus does quite the opposite indeed, and he doesn't seem to care if he plays by the rules. Jesus seeks to ensure equality and equal access for all, despite who it upsets.

Dr. Raj Nadella, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, offers regarding this text, "The man's actions – and those of Jesus – highlight the inherent structural problems in the system, and they pose some pertinent questions: Is it possible to become whole within the system? What does it mean to turn one's back on oppressive economic structures without completely excusing oneself from the larger community? How might it look?"^{vi}

See, in the resurrection of Christ, God offers to us all the opportunity, the gift, the empowerment, and the grace to receive new life. And in the gift of new life we receive, God invites us to join in Christ's work of extending that gift of new life to everyone. It doesn't matter their faith, it doesn't matter their named conviction, it doesn't matter if they follow all the rules that we believe are necessary, it doesn't matter if they have a visible desire or will, and it doesn't matter if the system is set up to help them. What matters is, they are a created being, a child of the risen Christ, and if we are going to follow faithfully Christ's leading, we too must take into consideration the necessity of going against the rules of the system, of breaking a few long-held beliefs, of bypassing the failures of human-created structures to ensure that God's love can be made known fully to all.

Friends, this is what it means that we are *Making a Place for Everyone to know God's love*. We are working, within and without the human structures that are designed to lift up the few at the expense of the many, to ensure that all people can receive the promise of new life in the resurrected Christ. Resurgence of life is not reserved for those who can check all the right boxes, it is offered to all who seek new life, to all who need new life, to all who have been outcast, overlooked, and left sitting at the pool's edge.

Do not sit quietly and wonder if those around you have a desire for new life? Do they have a will for healing? But extend the hope and promise of what new life offers. Break the rules, thwart the norms, and witness to the promise of the resurrection, that in Christ, death and sin have lost. God's grace and new life are available, an imminent, are promised, and God will not stop working until such love is known to all. It is Easter, and Christ is alive. Alleluia! Alleluia.

ⁱ Marianne Meye Thompson. *John: A Commentary (New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Elisabeth Johnson. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved May 21, 2019.

^v Raj Nadella. "Seeking Wholeness in an Inherently Flawed System." Huffpost.com. Retrieved May 22, 2019.

^{vi} Ibid.