

## **“Do You Want to Be Made Well?”**

### **John 5:1-18**

After spending the summer in the Galilee, the beautiful countryside and farmland surrounding the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples return south again to Jerusalem for the festival of the year, Succoth. It is the beginning of October when the Feast of Succoth is about to begin in Jerusalem. This is one of the 3 major festivals which all males of the people of God should attend annually. The purpose of Succoth is prayer for rain during the coming winter months so the springs will continue to flow and the dry hillsides will once again flourish.

As Jesus and his disciples walk south along the Jordan River, they catch glimpses of that elusive creature, the snake. The Galilee is a serpent's paradise. It knows exactly where to get food, even in the desert areas of the south. The snake has a shrewd knowledge of the land and survives by its skill at quickly catching its prey.

The temptation to idolize the snake is strong. Eve was not the only one ensnared by this cunning beast. Passing by the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, near the Jordan River, Jesus is reminded that people still bow to this creature in the hope of escape from dreaded pain and death. The pagans claim that the snake is Asclepius' messenger.

The story of Asclepius as the revered healer in Greek mythology is pictured with him holding a staff around which a snake is entwined. So an idolatrous world honors Asclepius as the bringer of life, as the great healer.

In that world of myth and idolatry, Jesus is leading his followers to the Feast of Succoth where they will pray for the end of the serpent's curse that expelled us from Eden. God's people hope for a final day of joy when paradise will return from which they will not be cast out

and in which they will no longer know sickness or death. Little did Jesus' followers know that the advent of that new paradise was and is walking with us.

After they cross the Jordan River near Bethany and head up the desert way to Jerusalem, the disciples are a bit more careful of where they step. A deadly carpet viper darts across their path, in no way encumbered by its cursed leglessness. They are reminded that the serpent is not only a symbol for healing – but one swift strike of its diamond shaped head spells instant death.

As they look south across the Dead Sea, they recall that in the days of the exodus, venomous serpents attacked the followers of Moses. God used this pagan symbol of healing to save a repentant wilderness generation whose sin had led to serpent-inflicted death. Anyone who would look to the snake would be healed.

As they continue their climb to Jerusalem, the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in Jerusalem last Passover echo. Jesus seemed to equate himself with the healing powers of the serpent. God had used so that death might Passover the people after they sinned in the wilderness. He claimed that even as Moses lifted up that healing serpent, so must He too, be lifted up.

Those words of Jesus in John 3:14-16 are the familiar words of the gift of true salvation. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Those who looked to him and believed in him at that “lifting up” would receive true salvation. This life would not be for the fleeting moment; but forever, because he is greater than any wilderness serpent.

Jesus and his followers arrive in Jerusalem for the festival.

John 5:2-3 – “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.”

It’s called the “Sheep Pool” because sheep are washed in this area before being taken to the temple for sacrifice. As Jesus approaches the Sheep Pool, his attention is not drawn to the great basins of water, but rather to the five porches or porticoes arranged in the form of a pentagon beside them. The gathering of people on these porches is anything but normal. A man hobbles along on a crutch. Several others carry a girl who seems to be on the threshold of death. Another walks gingerly on a newly healed foot.

Both pagans believing in the healing powers of the serpent and God’s people who have excused themselves from God’s care for a moment when their prayers for healing seemed to go unanswered, have come here out of desperation to find the healing spirit. God’s people might argue that this is another way God works. Did not God heal the wilderness generation with the serpent? People do claim to go away cured, so what can be wrong with this?

Near the porches are several shallow immersion pools with a few steps leading into them. They are filled with patients bathing themselves. Other patients can be seen smearing mud on their afflicted parts. In some grottoes the sick sleep, hoping that in their dreams the healing spirit or its messenger, the snake, might reveal a cure.

Jesus turns to one of the patients lying beside an immersion pool and asks if he wants to be healed. Rather than answer what would seem to be the most important question for him, he is too preoccupied with the superstition connected with this pool. He points to the water and those grouped around it and begins to complain. Every time the healing spirit comes and ripples the water by the breeze (a sign of the spirit’s presence), he is unable to get down the few

steps leading into the water fast enough to be the one who receives the gift of healing. He is desperate, for he has been sick 38 years. Nobody will help him beat the crowd, he complains, by throwing him into the pool.

John 5:5-9 -- <sup>5</sup>One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" <sup>7</sup>The sick man answered him, "Sir, 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." <sup>8</sup>Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." <sup>9</sup>At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath.

Jesus, ignoring the cripple's addiction to such superstition, orders him to get up, take his bed, and walk. Instantly he is healed, although he has not asked Jesus for healing. Feeling the movement coming back into his legs, he stands as Jesus is almost inundated by the crowd of patients pushing and shoving to get near the pools or grottoes as they seek instant cure. He is carried away by the flow of the crowd. The healed cripple, meanwhile, picks up his mattress and starts out from the shrine.

As he passes through, he is stopped by indignant Pharisees who inform him that by doing such work as carrying a mattress he is breaking the Sabbath. Has he no respect for the laws of Moses? Rather than accept responsibility for his action, he who has just been freed from such a shrine, tries to push the blame onto the One Who has cured him. When they inquire as to His name, he cannot answer. Incredible as it might seem, although he had been suffering for so long, he had not attempted to find Jesus in the crowd, or at least learn the name of his benefactor.

Later, when he does not come to Him, Jesus must seek out this healed cripple. He finds him in the Temple area just across from the shrine. How unresponsive is this former cripple! Instead of receiving immediate heartfelt thanks for healing him, Jesus must remind him that he is now better. Jesus does not indulge this ungrateful one. He warns him to sin no more and to avoid that place where he had grasped for straw hopes. False healing will only lead to death. Faith must not be placed in superstitious cures which in the end are not cures at all. In God alone must one's faith rest when things do not seem to go as well as they should. He must never go that way again, Jesus warns, so that nothing worse than sickness will come to him.

Jesus' warning falls on deaf ears, for the man is blind to the faith to which Jesus is pointing. He does not show even a small gesture of gratitude! He troops off to the Pharisees to report that the One Who forced him to violate the Sabbath and Whose name he could not produce at the time, is called Jesus! His report causes the opposition to Jesus to grow stronger among some Judeans who seem more worried about the technical points of the Mosaic Law than about the crippled soul of the man before them. When they confront Jesus at this feast of life, challenging His healing on a Sabbath, He explains that the healing took place because of His Father Who is working in Him. An inevitable collision course seems to impend. They will seek to kill this blasphemer. Who would dare to make Himself equal with God.

So here we are, 2000 years later, and Jesus is still asking the same question: "Do you want to be made well?" While the answer to this question may seem like a "no-brainer" as we light the candle of hope on this first Sunday in Advent; for some of us there are benefits to our illness that cause us to hesitate in answering Jesus' question.

What are some of the benefits of your illness? What personal privileges would you lose if you got better? Some people say they want to be healed but then block the healing process. Sickness becomes a lifestyle. I'm describing both physical and mental illness.

Some refuse to take the recommended therapy or medicine. And some people simply give up and have no will to live. Sometimes we are like the paralyzed man who had convinced himself that he would never get any better because the only cure he knew was to be the first to get into the pool.

Despite his negative attitude, Jesus finds him anyway, heals him anyway, and loves him anyway. Just as Jesus finds little Conner this morning, washes him clean in the waters of baptism, adopts him into his family, and will walk with Conner through all that the years will bring. Jesus makes Conner whole in this sacrament, as father Stephen is also made whole in the waters of baptism this morning.

This amazing story in John's Gospel gives each of us the hope of the first candle lit on the Advent Wreath. Hope that because Jesus loves the whole person, he will help each of us in becoming whole and healthy both physically and spiritually.

Is there an area of your life that has been less than whole and healthy for a long time, or even for a short time? How do you answer Jesus when he asks you: "Tell me, Do you really want to be made well?"

May the peace of God . . .

#581 – You Are Mine