

## **ENCOUNTERING JESUS WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT HIM**

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This is one of the rare weeks where the preacher has a choice of gospels. I have never preached on this passage here at St. Aidan's and we studied this passage in the Wednesday night bible study when we read the James Martin book Pilgrimage. And there is a theme that runs through this passage as well as our Acts passage about Lydia.

This is the third sign in John of Jesus as Messiah. Remember John has signs of Jesus' identity while the other gospels deal in miracles to show something different about him. John is all about showing Jesus as the Messiah and son of God from the very start. First there is the wedding in Cana and then the healing of the official's son in Capernaum, which happened just before this passage. In all three Jesus just speaks and the miraculous occurs. With the official's son in Capernaum the official approaches Jesus and tells him his son is deathly ill. Jesus simply says to him your son has been healed. Later the official discovers that at the very moment Jesus said he was healed he immediately recovered.

All of these signs are focused on an encounter with God/Jesus that happen in unexpected ways and seem to come almost out of nowhere. A wedding is running out of wine and all of a sudden there is more than enough. In this story a man has been waiting for 38 years to be healed and all of a sudden there is Jesus standing in front of him.

As with every story a little background is helpful. This is one place in Jerusalem where the location is absolutely known and is clearly identified. It was rediscovered during some other excavations and is exactly as described by John. Beth-zatha or Bethesda is the name depending on which translation you use. The name means either House of Mercy or House of Shame depending on whether you use the Aramaic or Hebrew

Every so often the flow of water under the pool would agitate the water and it seems that the belief was that the first to enter the water would be healed. It was not the water that provided the healing, but the belief that the agitation of the water was caused by an angel. That is what gave the pool its healing qualities.

It is important to notice the question Jesus asks the man. Not what is wrong, or how are you, but do you want to be made well, do you want to be healed? What an interesting question. One would think that of course he wants to be healed, but sometimes people are so accustomed to their illness they have no desire to be made well. They would not know how to function if they were healthy. They don't want to change.

Note the man doesn't answer the question but immediately offers an excuse for why he has not been healed yet. There is also a very sad aspect to the man's answer. There is a deep loneliness in his response, "I have no one to help me into the water." He is totally alone and seemingly helpless. I wonder if Jesus knew not only that he had been ill for a long time, but also knew that part of the reason was that he was alone. Jesus is always there for the lonely the outcast the one that nobody seems to love. That is part of the gift that he brings.

Sometimes healing comes in unexpected ways. I suspect the man fully expected that Jesus and his friends would help him into the water. However Jesus commands him to stand up, take his mat and walk. I find it interesting that there is no hesitation on the part of the man. As I was meditating on this from the aspect of the paralyzed man I was wondering how I would respond. My gut said that I would look at Jesus and think, "What do you mean get up can't you see I'm paralyzed?" Yet there is no fumbling or what are you talking about if I could do that I wouldn't be laying here from the man. Something so profound happens that he obeys, gets up and takes up his mat and walks. He is healed, he, in the literal translation of the word, is made whole. Think about the implications of that. Not just a physical healing but returned to society.

Sometimes, no often Jesus shows up in unexpected ways, but sometimes he is the one being ministered to or is a person that we encounter. The Lydia and Paul story have some of that element. Paul has left the city looking for Jews who are praying. Now this tells us just how small the Jewish community is in Philippi. There are not the 10 Jewish men needed to form the minyan that was required for a synagogue. And who does he encounter, a bunch of women including one God fearer, which means a Gentile who follows Jewish custom.

A most remarkable person is Lydia, a widow who is apparently well off. As a dealer in purple she would have clients in the top 2% of the city because purple was the most expensive dye and only the wealthy and ruling class could afford it. In fact it was a sign of wealth. She is in business for herself and while that was possible it was not usual. She responds to Paul's teaching and her entire household is baptized immediately in the river. Then she invites Paul and his companions to stay at her house. Her house becomes the base for the young church in Philippi. I'm sure Paul was quite surprised by all of this.

Several years ago when I was still a band director and living in Shaker Heights Ohio I had one such experience. St. Paul's is a large resource size parish. Because we were the largest Episcopal Church in the area we were assigned the last Monday of the month to provide dinner at a large Baptist church. One in fact where Martin Luther King Jr. preached. The last month was always the largest dinner because most had run through their food stamps and welfare money by then. Every year when we were doing the dinner in December we pulled out all the stops and did a huge Christmas feast. Wendy and I along with our two boys who were in middle school and high school would bring our instruments down and play Christmas Carols while dinner was being served.

One year we had played our first 30 minutes and were getting ready to play again as the dinner was ending. A woman who could only be described as a bag lady came up to the stage. She set her bags down that probably contained everything she owned, took off her coat and looked at us. This was a street person if I ever saw one. Clearly she had not had a bath or shower in a long time. I said, "Can I help you." She replied by asking me if we knew a particular Christmas carol. I told her of course would you like us to play it. She nodded her head. So we started off that set of carols with the one she requested. As we began to play she opened her mouth and began to sing. She had a wonderful voice and all conversation in the room stopped. When we finished everyone broke into applause. Then requests started to come from the folks who were eating. We played and she sang. You could hear a pin drop, everyone was mesmerized by her singing. Then she said, "Come on everybody sing." And for the next hour everybody did. The people from St. Paul's were singing, the people who were being fed were singing and the members of the Baptist Church were singing. For a wonderful period of 60 minutes poverty, hunger, tough times racial and cultural differences were all forgotten.

As we were cleaning up I asked the folks at the church if they knew who she was. They replied no, they had never seen her before. The next year when we came down to play I looked for her, but she never came and while we had a good time, it was not the same. I learned a valuable lesson that Christmas from this woman. It pays to be open to wonder, to see Jesus in your presence even when the presence of Christ arrives in a smelly old bag lady. I don't know her story, but I know she blessed everyone that night with her gifts that had no price in dollars.

So like the man at the pool, be ready to be surprised by Christ. Like Paul, be ready to be surprised by a person who is ready and open to the Spirit when you least expect it. People talk about spreading the gospel and we so often hesitate. The key is to watch for those openings and even more important seize them, speak up or do what you are called to do.