

## ***By the Pools of Beth-Zatha***

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### **Behind the Text**

We continue our journey through the Gospel of John this week.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew/Mark/Luke) tell us what Jesus *said and did*. John tells us *who Jesus is*.

John has no parables, of which there are about 30 in the synoptics. Rather he has these extended discourses on various subjects, quite often in conversation with someone like Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman at the well. All unique to John.

In John things come in sevens.

There are seven “I am” statements in his gospel. These sayings seem to play off of the Old Testament name of Yahweh, I AM. Jesus uses analogies to describe his ontological identity:

I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate for the sheep; the good shepherd; resurrection and the life; the way the truth and the life; I am the true vine.<sup>i</sup> When you put this together like that it is quite a powerful set of images. This is who he is.

There are seven miracles in John<sup>ii</sup> In the synoptics about 30 different miracles.

Six of them are unique to John; the only one that is also found in the synoptics is the feeding of the 5000.

These miracles are called “signs” by John, which gives a definite shape to his presentation. Not all use the word, but the first two do, ***This is the first sign...*** (water into wine, 2:11); ***This is the second sign...*** (healing of the official’s son, 4:54), and so on.

Each one has a special purpose in the overall landscape of John to reveal a special aspect of Jesus’ magnificent identity. To call them “signs” is a technical word to indicate that they are specifically given to reveal his identity:

- Water into wine at the wedding (2, symbolizing new covenant);
- healing the royal official’s son (4, symbolizing gentile inclusion in the gospel);
- healing the cripple man (5, symbolizing the grace over law);
- feeding the 5000 (6, Jesus is the bread of heaven, symbolizing spiritual food);
- walking on water (6, symbolizing Jesus’ lordship over creation);
- healing the man blind from birth (9, symbolizing spiritual enlightening);
- raising Lazarus (11, symbolizing victory over death – the great climax of the signs).

The reason for this structure is that John is building... building a round and deep portrait of Jesus.

By way of background, we observe that the synoptics tell us what Jesus said and did; John tells us who Jesus is.

## In the Text

Our text for the morning is the third “sign” of Jesus’ identity, the healing of the man who had been ill for 38 years. The scene shifts suddenly from Galilee to Jerusalem for a **festival of the Jews** (5:1). The scene is the Sheep Pool at the northern entrance to the walled city of Jerusalem.

(In John’s gospel there are three visits to Jerusalem, compared to only one in the synoptic tradition.)

This is the Valley of Bethsaida (**Beth-Zatha**) next to the northern city wall.



Is the location of the water reserves for the city. In fact, there were innumerable reservoirs for the storing of water, but this would be a main source for temple activities. The Pool of Israel, adjacent to the city wall, was about the size of a football field and 100 feet deep!

Some of the cisterns are said to have still been in use in the mid-twentieth century. There is a parking lot over the site now.

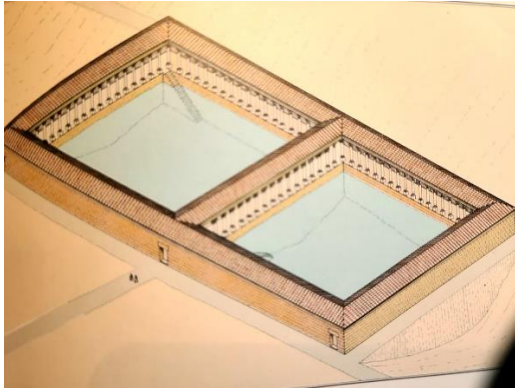
Washing of sacrificial animals, cleaning out the sacrifice area within the temple, ritual ablutions and human consumption for vast crowds.

The Sheep Pool, I have a picture for you. It’s just part of the back-end operation of the temple in the water management area.

(There were two pools and they were large. One 180 feet long and one 200 feet long. These have been excavated and you can see the complicated remains.)

This is a place for livestock to be washed before sacrifice on an industrial scale. It is not pristine, potable water. Waste and sludge collect in the bottom of these pools. The public doesn’t come here.

Eusebius, the 4<sup>th</sup> century writer who chronicled 340 biblical sites in the *Onomasticon*, remarks that that north pool was still stained purple red from the sheep washed there.



It doesn't actually say he was lame, but he can't get into the water, so there was some mobility issue.

Here ...*lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed* (5:3)

What is the meaning of this healing?

And its so sad, because the desperately ill congregate here because of an apparently long-standing legend that occasionally an angel would disturb the waters and whoever got in first was healed. Every person clawing over the other. (A healing cult persisted at the site into the Roman era).

*This* is where we find Jesus of Nazareth on his visit to Jerusalem?! In this case, the meaning of the healing isn't so much in what Jesus did – abruptly heal a man long ill - **“Stand up, take your mat and walk.”**

That is, the Son of God was *there at the Pool* – not two hundred and fifty yards from the Holy of Holies in the inner Sanctuary of the temple. God was here at the pool with the desperate.

We know the gospel teaches us that God is everywhere, but this reminds us that God is especially those places we overlook. The presence of God is always a surprise.

The Presence of God blows through the Sheep Pools like a wind one day. It alights on one poor soul. And moves on...

Do you ever wonder, as I do, what Jesus would do in our current world?

In the news this week I read an article about the Kensington area of Philadelphia. Philly is a pretty rough city in areas, but this neighborhood has gone viral for its squalor and desperation. Fentanyl users and addicts are lying about everywhere, garbage fills the gutters. It is looks like the ninth circle of hell.

People have taken to driving by and taking pictures and videos and posting them on social media. They are making derisive comments on line. Our culture has become very low-brow.

I think that Kensington might be where we would find the Son of God if he were to come in the flesh again, not in the halls of wealth and comfort.

The other teaching is about the *why* of this healing. It seems to be an intentional provocation of the ruling authorities in the temple. Because Jesus does this on the Sunday (Sabbath).

The authorities who had begun to “persecute” Jesus when the authorities learned he was healing on the Sabbath – which was prohibited. They even told the man he couldn’t carry his mat on the Sabbath – what a delicious irony! He doesn’t even know who healed him, because Jesus disappeared into the crowd after it happened.

I read up in the Mishnah and it seems that while it is specifically forbidden to straighten a deformed limb (Mishnah *Shabbat* 22:6), in general healing was only allowed if a life was in danger “...if life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath” (Mishnah *Yoma* 8:6).

There follows a long lecture, really, by Jesus on his relationship to God the Father in vss 16-47. It raises the whole conflict between religious tradition and actions born of true love.

Jesus says some pretty astonishing things to those who want him to obey the rules of religion. Like:

***Indeed, just at the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.*** (5:21)

Your rules don’t determine where the wind of God blows. Let’s just have faith in God and do our best to do good and live life pleasing to God. The wind of God will blow.

#### **From the Text**

I’m not really sure what to make of all this in terms of our daily lives, to be honest.

The most fearful thought in human experience is utter aloneness. I’ve never been lonely. Moved from a loving home to married life. Kids, career. Too much to do all the time. No time to be lonely.

Still, to me life without the Presence of God would be the ninth circle of hell. I think C.S. Lewis tends to view hell this way, it is the place where, by our own choice, God is not.

The saddest thing about a god-less world view is that it means living life without a divine Presence. What a terrible fate. Our faith teaches us that God *is* and *will always* be present in life. This is the secret of a happy life.

Jesus at the back end of the operation? In the swill of the water works? This is the great miracle and glorious gift of the I AM. We will never be alone! And we think, ‘Well, God isn’t with me.’

Let’s look for the Presence in places we might not expect to find it. Because that is where we are most to find it!

I close with this.

Like the hallway of your condo. Someone told me the story of their neighbor who had lost her husband earlier this year. And after determinedly befriending this woman, here she was a Sharps, gratefully drinking in the fellowship and finding a way in life that had seemed so suddenly empty.

I wish we could claim grandiose accomplishments and spiritual victory. But the Presence is in the place we least expect to find it. Blowing like a wind **from** where we know not... **to** where we know not.

Thanks be to God. Amen

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- I am the bread of life (6:35)
  - I am the light of the world (8:12)
  - I am the gate for the sheep (10:7)
  - I am the good shepherd (10:11)
  - I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)
  - I am the way and the truth and the life (14:6)
  - I am the true vine (15:1)

<sup>ii</sup> Water into wine at the wedding (2); healing the official's son (4); healing the cripple man (5); feeding the 500 (6); walking on water (6); healing the blind man (9); raising Lazarus (11).