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The National Presbyterian Church

A Paralyzed Man: Want to Get Well?

John 5:1-18

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Prayer of Illumination: Holy God who caused all scripture to be inspired, come by Your Holy Spirit and illumine the word through the words that are sung, through the words that are prayed, through the words that are spoken, through this word that is preached, may we not leave this place until and unless we have heard a word from You to touch us and meet us where we are this day and to lead us forward into Your purposes and for Your glory. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we ask this prayer. Amen.

In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it in the gospel according to Saint John, one of four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry that we have in the pages of Holy Scripture. Our focus through the Fall is on Jesus' interaction with a whole host, a whole variety of people whom John introduces us to, whose lives intersect with Jesus' life and are changed by that interaction, by that intersection, by their paths crossing paths with his path – changed forever. John tells us (20:34, 21:25) that there are so many stories of Jesus that he could have included in his gospel that there wouldn't be enough books to tell them all. But he has chosen these ones because through these stories in particular, he wants us to come to believe, as he did and as others did, that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and that by believing we will find life in his name. So his purpose is that through these stories, through seeing these people we may find ourselves wrapped up in the story of Jesus too, with our lives interacting and intersecting with his as theirs did long ago.

Today we actually are going to be thinking about three people, one of whom we've heard of in our reading of John Chapter 5 – a paralyzed man who had been paralyzed for 38 years who is healed by Jesus at the pool of Bethzatha (also known as Bethsaida, or Bethesda: there are three different variations of that name). But we also want to spend a short time looking back to the end of Chapter 4, to the story, as well, of a royal official whose son was also healed by Jesus. Both of these stories at the end of John Chapter 4 and the beginning of John Chapter 5 are connected – not only by the fact that a person is healed in the stories, but they are connected by the fact that *they both have to do with time – with God's timing in human lives, in their lives, in your life and in my life. God's*

immaculate, impeccable – though it may not always seem that way – God’s timing.

So before we look at these stories specifically, I’d like us to think just a little bit about time and about some of the conundrums about time in our lives – to think about the importance of time and timing within our lives.

‘Time’ for all of us may have seemed normal, mundane . . . until we heard about Albert Einstein and then we became really confused! Albert Einstein came along a hundred years ago and through his ‘special theory of relativity’ he began to say some strange things. He began to say that when we go really fast, if we could travel at close to the speed of light then what we would find is that time slows down. At different speeds, time is not the same length! That may seem absurd to us: it is not the same length. If you go fast time slows down. This is what he said. And we might find ourselves saying that this is just a load of poppycock were it not for the fact that each of us has had some experience in our lives in which time does seem to move at a different rate, depending on where we are in life and what we’re doing.

- There are times when time slows down. Not when we’re going close to the speed of light but when we’re doing something that we hate – when we’re in a waiting room, for example, and we twiddle our thumbs thinking we’ll never be called.
- Or when we’re doing nothing and we wish we were doing something and we’re just marking time: time seems to last forever and ever.
- Or when you’re listening to a sermon sometimes it may be like that.

Or think about when you’ve got an exam: when time can be both slow and fast!

- To begin with, you think you’ve got all the time in the world. It’s one hour, two hours, you’ve got all the time in the world, three hours and then it’s done. Then time begins to run out and it’s gone! But you’ve still got questions that you need to answer.
- Or think of a paper that’s due or a report that’s due – to begin with you’ve got two or three months (all the time in the world) and then the months go by and then you’re in the final week and you’re down to the last moment or two . . . and time before you know it is all gone. What you thought you had, has left you, disappeared. And so we say there’s never enough time.
- Especially when we get older, we tend to say “well, time just flies by; the years go by and I just don’t know where they go.” There is this is the sense of time speeding up.

How strange time is. At different times in our life when we’re doing different things, time appears to us to act differently. So that instead of time being fixed or concrete, it really does seem (at times!) as if Einstein was right: that time is actually malleable: it can speed up or it can slow down . . .

And it can also be the cause for us of what seems to be a great coincidence or an awful tragedy when we are at the wrong place at the wrong time or the right place at the right time. And each of us knows that experience as well. Probably on both sides, great coincidence, awful tragedy, at different times. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time and the right place at the right time . . . and we say “how amazing is that.”

In my own life one of my favorite stories about being at the right place at the right time occurred just over five years ago when our family was moving from Lexington, Kentucky, to Spartanburg in South Carolina, and I was moving my books. There were a large number of boxes filled with heavy books and some friends provided a big truck and a trailer to move them. It was a hot summer day. These two friends, both ten or fifteen years older than I, were helping me load the boxes in the driveway. But they said to me “David, we don’t need your help. You don’t know what you’re doing. We’ll load up the trailer. We’ve got to balance it perfectly or it will come unhooked from the truck. If it’s not in balance perfectly, this will happen so you let us do this.”

So I’m outside this trailer twiddling my thumbs feeling a little guilty that I’m not helping them and along comes a jogger whom I recognize. This is a person I had married to a young woman a year before. He was not a member of the church, but she was. I had not seen him since the wedding, but I recognized him and waved at him, and he stopped and we began to chat. And as we chatted about how things had been the past year I suddenly blurted out to him “You don’t know anybody who wants to buy a house do you?” And he said “Well, actually I do. My in-laws want to buy a house. We’re moving into their house which is just a few blocks away, and they want to remain in the neighborhood.” And he said, “I’ll talk to them about it.” And then two days later they came by . . . and they bought the house, pretty much there and then! It was the only nibble we had. But here’s the really interesting point: If I’d actually been doing something productive, if I’d been working, if I’d been inside that trailer moving the books, I would have missed it! I mean . . . the timing was simply unbelievable: it was just in a flash that I saw him jogging and caught his eye. And there it was: he stopped and we sold the house because of that.

And you, too, perhaps can tell stories like that, of how something happened because the timing was wonderful or amazing, and we somehow thought that God was in the middle of it.

In John Chapter 4 and in John Chapter 5 John brings together two remarkable stories that speak not only about Jesus’ control over our lives: our health, our strength, our ability fulfill the will of God; but he brings together these stories which are also connected in different ways to God’s timing, God’s control over time. Both stories show us a Jesus who is the Lord of Time.

The first story is at the end of John Chapter 4 and is about a royal official who happens to be in the village of Cana in Galilee when Jesus is there. Jesus is moving north and south of Israel, between his home region of Galilee (in the north) and Jerusalem (in the south). And he has moved back to Cana of Galilee to preach or teach there – when he meets this royal official who comes up to him and says “My son, who lives in Capernaum (about 20 miles) is really, really sick and I want you to come with me to help him and to heal him.” And Jesus says that he doesn’t need to go with the official, but it’s going to be okay. His son is going to be all right. And there’s something in Jesus’ word which enables this royal official to believe him. And so the official packs his bags and leaves for home and as he’s approaching home he meets some of his slaves who come rushing out to him and they tell him that his son is better. And the man immediately begins to think of timing. Out of the blue this is his main issue. He asks them “What time was it when he began to get better?” And they say that it was the previous day around one o’clock. And he says “Ah, exactly the time when Jesus spoke.” He puts two and two together . . . and so the story of healing becomes also a story about Jesus as being Lord of Time.

And this is important because the same kind of thing is going to weave its way into the story that we read as our scripture reading in all kinds of different ways. So we move into Chapter 5 to the passage that we read a few moments ago. And we find Jesus now in Jerusalem, now down south in Jerusalem coming to this pool of Bethzatha (or Bethesda or Bethsaida!), and there he sees a person who we discover has been paralyzed for 38 years . . .and the time, 38 years, is specifically mentioned. This is a long, long time. In ancient times this was a lifetime! This person has been paralyzed for a lifetime, hoping that he could be healed for 38 years, believing that the water in the pools has curative powers. But nothing happens. For 38 long years nothing happens. He always seems to be at the wrong place at the wrong time . . . until Jesus comes and meets him and speaks to him. And all of the timing begins to change. Jesus speaks to him and he asks him this question. Do you want to be well? That is, do you still have hope? Do you still think that your life can be productive? Or are you going to spend the rest of your time here? Do you want to be well?

And the man replies that he *does* have some measure of hope: “I’m still trying to get to the pool,” he says. “Whenever the water is stirred up that’s when I think it’s at its most powerful but somebody always gets there before me. I’m just never at the right place at the right time.” And so there’s some despair in his voice. But Jesus doesn’t give in to the despair for this man: the wrong time has now become the right time precisely because Jesus the Lord of Time is right beside him where he is. The man did nothing to deserve Jesus’ being there. Jesus appears out of the blue. And then Jesus says to the man these remarkable words: “Take up your mat and walk!” He asks him to do what the man has not done in 38 years: “Take up your mat and walk!” And just like the royal official who somehow believes that what Jesus says is true, the man, probably much to his own surprise, does it. He gets up, takes up his mat and walks.

And there would have been this wonderful ‘moment in time’ which, if there had been a camera there, a photographer could have captured. The moment, and we can all think of similar moments, when he’s more surprised than anybody that he’s standing up; just can’t quite believe it – and there would be this look of shock and amazement on his face. And as the camera would go down the line you would suddenly see him bursting out with laughter at what had happened and you would see the people looking around because they’d been there, many of them, surely, for some time as well, and they knew he had served the longest time of all there. And their hands would be in the air in absolute amazement and in wonder.

What an amazing wonderful moment in time. All rejoicing! . . . But not exactly! Unfortunately, that is not what we read in the story. Not everybody was rejoicing at that moment in time. For what may seem to us to be a really rather picky reason there were some people there, the religious leaders there, *who were not rejoicing at all*. They were, in fact, very unhappy at what Jesus did. They were very unhappy to see this man healed . . . and their unhappiness was all because of the time when Jesus did it: Jesus performed the miracle, we read, on the Sabbath day – and for them that was the wrong timing. The fact that this man was now healed was irrelevant to them. For them the only thing that mattered was that the timing was wrong: *this was the Sabbath day*. Jesus was breaking the fourth commandment, one of the Ten Commandments about the Sabbath day, “to keep it holy and to do no work on the Sabbath day.” To these nay-sayers, to heal was to work. To ask this man to lift up his mat and walk was to ask him to work. So, to them, Jesus was encouraging the breaking of the Sabbath and they were as upset as they could be. And in their being upset it almost seems as if the timing of things – especially in Jesus’ life, is going to begin to unravel and become out of control completely.

They challenge the man and they challenge Jesus about the time in which he does this and all Jesus does it seems is to make matters worse. In John Chapter 5 Verse 17 we read Jesus answered them: “My father is still working and I also am working.” The verse doesn’t say “our” father, but “my” father as if there is a unique relationship with God-the-Father who is still working, not just in creating (the first six days, remember Genesis 1), but, according to Jesus, working on the seventh day, the Sabbath (5:17-18)

“My Father is working still, and I am working. For this reason they were seeking all the more to kill him. [DR: To kill him! To break the 6th Commandment! Simply because at the wrong time and he has healed a man] because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own father thereby making himself equal to God.

Things are beginning to spiral out of control. What seemed to us to begin with as Jesus turning up at the right time at the right place for this man, and making all the time which had been so very wrong for 38 years, now so right and good, now

seems to be gone. Jesus seems to be at the wrong time and the wrong place, when the spiral begins, the countdown begins which is going to end in his death.

If only Jesus had waited one day! I mean, after all, this man had been ill for 38 years. What could one day do to change that? If he'd waited, then Jesus wouldn't have upset all those people there. Let me put it like this, if I add it up correctly, this man had been at that pool for between 13 and 14 thousand days, and Jesus chooses *this* day to turn up – the day in which people would blame him for healing the man on the wrong day. Why could he not have waited one more day? The timing would have been different; they wouldn't have hated him so much. He might still be alive and not have died. If only.

But of course this is the wrong way to think! And we know this because we know the story of the official and his son! We know that Jesus is the Lord of Time. We've been shown that already and there is no mistake in Jesus' timing. Even if from a human point of view things end up tragically with his death there is no mistake in his timing.

The early disciples pick up on this repeatedly, this sense of timing with Jesus.

- Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:23) speaks about Jesus' death occurring "by the deliberate plan and foreknowledge of God." He knew about the timing.
- And the apostle Paul writing to the Romans in the 5th Chapter speaks about Jesus' death in this way too: his death to restore our lives to God, to remove from our lives every barrier between us and God, our awful sins and our picky habits which divide us from one another or from God! The apostle Paul writes of Jesus' death as removing these things, **and** as occurring at exactly the right time (5:6-11):

"At the right time while we were yet helpless, while we were still sinners – these are statements about time and God's timing, Christ died for the ungodly."

He didn't wait until we repented. He didn't say "I'll come and love you *when, only after the time*, you begin to love me.

He didn't say to us we had to shape up before he would come down. *At the right time*, before we did a thing, before we could lay any claim of our goodness on God, God through Jesus Christ dies for us.

By this, says the apostle Paul, *he proves his love for us*, by dying for us *before the time* we could do anything to earn it or deserve it – out of sheer grace – so that we might know that even in the darkest of all moments when we think that things are spiraling out of control and that God has no control and we certainly have no control over time, and things are going terribly wrong, God's timing is impeccably and terribly right.

Professor Houston Smith, perhaps the leading expert in the last 50 years on the religions of the world, tells an old Chinese tale about timing that points out how blind we are to so much of what's going on in the 'timing' of events around about us. Of course there are times (like the story of selling my house while moving my books!) where you see rather clearly how God is at work, but then there are other times when we just don't see this at all. But it doesn't mean that God is not working by any stretch of the imagination as the Lord of Time.

Houston Smith's story (known in China as "Border Man Lost Horse Not Known Disaster Blessing") is about a farmer who has a horse and the horse runs away.

A neighbor comes and commiserates with this farmer about his bad fortune.

And all that the farmer says is, "Who knows what is good or bad?" The horse runs away, he loses the horse, he throws his hands up in the air! And, "who knows what is good or bad?"

And sure enough the next day the horse returns and it has befriended a group of wild horses –

so it doesn't return alone, it returns with a whole bunch of other horses.

And so now this farmer has a whole stable full of horses. And the neighbor comes by now, not to commiserate, but to celebrate with him on his good fortune. And the farmer who is very stoic about all of this says, "Who knows what is good or bad?"

And sure enough the farmer has a son who tries to ride one of these wild horses and he gets thrown off the horse and he breaks a leg. And so the neighbor comes by to commiserate with him and the stoic farmer says, even with his son's broken leg, "Well, who knows what is good or bad?" His son is lying there with his broken leg, and he still says, "Who knows what is good or bad?"

And then the story ends the next day, when the army recruiters come by through the district and they're commandeering all the young men to go into the army . . . except for those with those who are disabled in some way . . . like those with a broken leg! "Who knows what is good or bad?" What perfect timing, even with a broken leg! At the very moment when you may think that this is the last thing you need, the timing is all wrong; who knows . . . it may be that the timing is perfect.

Today, we're not going to address the question as to why these things happen, but we are going to say, as the scriptures say, that no matter where we are or what we've done or where we've been *God has the power to redeem all of those things and to bring them back into what eventually will see as his perfectly timed plan and purpose for our lives.*

God is at work . . . God can be at work . . . often God seems to love to be at work . . . at precisely those moments and times when we least expect it, when for all the world it seems as if God is far away.

These two stories remind us that Jesus, the Son of God, is the Lord of All Time and of *your* time and *my* time.

- In fact it may well be that it's precisely at those moments when we, like the royal official, come to Jesus and say "Come on Jesus, be with me in the thick and thin of life" and Jesus seems to say, "No I'm not going there" that Jesus is actually there – way ahead of us.
- It may be precisely when we've been waiting so long that we have no hope (like thirty-eight long years) for something to change, for someone to change, for our lives to heal in some way whether it's physical or spiritual, mental or whatever it may be and we've given up all hope, that Jesus says *now* is the time.
- It may be precisely when we feel as if we are always amongst those who are never at the right place at the right time but always amongst those who are at the wrong place at the wrong place and the wrong time, that that is the very moment when Jesus comes up and says to you and me as he said to that man at the pool, "Do you want to be well? I want you to be well. I want you to be well enough so that whatever you've done or left undone in the years that have gone by, the years that lie ahead will be your best years in serving and honoring me, with a growing sense that your life adds up to something and is not merely a waste of time. "Do you want to get well? There are good days to come!" Today is the day when he says that to us as he said that to that man so long ago.

No matter how we feel the timing has been in our lives in the past, this Jesus who lived long ago is alive today and not just in Bethesda (Maryland or Jerusalem?), but here in DC and here in this church with you and me. We are, all of us, at that pool, which means that he is here with us. And he wants us passionately, no matter how we feel about time, to be well. Jesus the Lord of Time has the power to make it so in the way in which our lives will be most joyful and productive and effective for him. And we will say how amazing is that? This, after all, is the day – the time, the moment – that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God, Lord of all seasons, Lord of all Time, creator of this amazing universe and creator of our lives and redeemer of our lives through Jesus Christ, be our redeemer this day at this moment in time where we are – even if, and especially if we are not well, if we are stuck. Set us free. May we like the royal official or like the man who picked up his mat and walked, move on our way knowing that You have and will always touch us at the right time, in the days and the moments that You give to us with your healing power. Amen.

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