

“38 Years on the Verge”¹

(JOHN 5:1-9 NRSV) *After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When 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?” ⁷The 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.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.*

The Pool of Bethzatha (Bethesda). Jesus asked, “Do you want to get well?” Dumb question, huh? At least on the surface; but take a closer look. *Thirty-eight years* the man had been ill!

Thirty-eight years: 13,880 days. Some versions include vs. 4, which says, “several times a day, an angel of the LORD stirred the water, and the first person into the pool after the water was stirred was healed.” I don't know what is meant by “several times”; but, let's say three times a day. Over thirty-eight years, that's 41,640 times. The man has had 41,000 shots at getting into the pool and being healed! *Thirty-eight years “on the verge”*, but never in the pool.

I've been there, haven't you? *On the verge?* Some of *us* have spent a significant part of our lives there: feeling like there is the real, the significant, the vital; then there's *my* life. *There's* the field of action, and *here* are the sidelines where I sit: a bench warmer waiting for my shot.

The media, history textbooks, biographies focus on significant people accomplishing significant things. Astronauts and detectives, physicians and scientists... They know what they're doing, and it seems so real and important. We're just readers and spectators: *on the verge*; they're in the pool—in the game.

Sometimes I still feel like a small boy looking through a knothole in a fence, watching the big boys playing football, or smoking, or talking about girls.

Sometimes even in the midst of activity, it all seems unreal. Jennifer was in a student group I formed at Central State in Edmond, OK. She was a student Senator, and earnestly gave herself to the politicking; but, all along, she felt it's not the “real world”; just campus politics. Sometimes it all feels like we're just practicing, just getting ready for the “real”, the significant, the vital yet to come.

We're not in the pool yet, but *we are on the verge*. Just a little more preparation and planning, just a little different set of circumstances, just a little patching here and a little polishing there, then I'll be ready.

¹ I am indebted to James Dittes for the title of this sermon and for the general exegesis of the text. He preached a sermon with the same title during a chapel service while I was in seminary.

Yeah. We've all been "on the verge". But for thirty-eight years? It *does* raise the question in my mind: the same question Jesus asked the man. "Do you want to get well?" And the man's reply: "I have no one to help me into the pool."

"My welfare—my vitality—my future—the fulfillment of my goals and purposes: depend on somebody else." I'm the victim of harsh potty training; my father never hugged me; I was abused as a child; my mother was an alcoholic; I was the victim of poverty.

After 27 years as a political prisoner in an apartheid culture, Nelson Mandela was freed. He wrote: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be a prisoner."

Not everyone who grows up in the ghetto turns out to be a criminal. Not everyone who has done time grows hard and vengeful. Even deep anger, hurt, or fear don't always trigger anti-social reactions. Humans control their emotions and redirect them all the time.

In fact, when I look at how many people successfully negotiate life, in *spite* of adversity, I begin to wonder: how much does blaming something in the past—how much does reverence for victimhood—really function to help people stay stuck in their problems.

Of course, there are situations and conditions beyond our control. Cancer, Alzheimer's, somebody runs a red light; but for most of us, most of the time, the messes that entangle our lives are of our own making—the result of our own choices. And I believe there's a part of each of us that's not finished; a part we *can* change, but it's just too comfortable to stay as we are—just too convenient to blame others, to blame circumstance. "I have no one to help me into the pool."

The victim stance is the modern promised land of exemption from personal responsibility. Has the question crossed *your* mind yet: "How did that invalid man get to edge of the pool in the first place? Did somebody carry him? Did he walk on crutches? 41,000 times the water was troubled. Could he not once have called upon the same resources that got him to 'the verge' to get him into the pool?"

But when Jesus asked: "Do you want to get well?" the man's reply was, "I have no one to help me into the pool."—**And here's the key for us today:** Jesus didn't ask him about getting into the pool. He asked, "Do you want to get well?"

Sometimes we preachers, in our desperation to have a sermon ready every week, end up answering questions nobody is asking. In the text, the man answers the wrong question! He wasn't listening. He was too busy trying to justify his 38 years—41,000 times—he's been right there—watched it happen—and hasn't figured out how to use the resources available to him to achieve his goals. But that wasn't

the question!

In Christ, there is no such thing as being on the verge. Christ places our situation in a different perspective: you have choices: *right where you are*, "Take up your bed and walk." Don't worry about present problems—hectic schedules, bothersome relationships. Don't hide in false hopes for the future—some other place or time where you'll be sure of yourself and prepared—or win the lottery.

Of course, there are boundaries to our possibilities: old age, gimpy knees, aching backs, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain damage... But within those boundaries lies untapped potential in each of us.

Three weeks ago, I joined a gym and started working out. It had been almost three years since I'd worked out, and it didn't take long for me to discover some new boundaries in my physical condition. So, I've scheduled a fitness evaluation with a trainer who will help me identify the boundaries and develop a workout program to maximize my potential within those boundaries—and perhaps even to extend those boundaries further out.

There are two things of which we can be relatively certain: (1) the future probably will be as unclear as the present, and (2) this present life already is amazingly equipped with untapped potential, if we can identify and accept our boundaries—our limits—and work within them.

Lent is a season for getting back into shape, spiritually. I like to call spirituality "intimacy with God"; it implies total honesty, and vulnerability. In that intimacy with God, and trusting in God's grace, we are free to take full responsibility for, and accept the consequences of, our decisions and the behavior that results from our decisions. In Christian spirituality we stand before God "just as we are," trusting that God won't leave us as we are. God's not finished with us, yet.

God is in you, working divine healing in and through you. We don't have to wait for some angelic troubling of the waters before we can become whole. We don't even have to explain and justify why we are the way we are, because Jesus already has pronounced the Word, "Take up your bed."

It is possible that in the unlikeliness of your present situation and with all the unlikeliness of yourself as you now are—not even waiting until your headache feels better or until you get those letters written, or until you get those phone calls made (or until you get away from the phone) or until you get those bills paid or until you can consult about your situation or even until you make up your mind—God may touch you to cleanse, to reveal, to reclaim and empower you and your life.

At Christ's command, you can "Rise, take up your bed, and walk."