

THE VOICE UPON THE WATERS

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Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

Today's readings from Revelation and the Gospel of John both remind me of a figure from Greek mythology by the name of Tantalus. Tantalus was a son of Zeus, but he ran seriously afoul of his temperamental father. Thus he earned for himself an eternal punishment in the underworld. In his great epic The Odyssey, Homer describes the fate of Tantalus:

The old man was standing in a pool of water which nearly reached his chin, and his thirst drove him to unceasing efforts; but he could never get a drop to drink. For whenever he stooped in his eagerness to lap the water, it disappeared. The pool was swallowed up, and all he saw at his feet was the dark earth, which some mysterious power had parched. Trees spread their foliage high over the pool and dangled fruits above his head – pears, pomegranates, apples, sweet figs, and luxurious olives. But whenever the old man tried to grasp them in his hands, the wind would toss them up towards the shadowy clouds.

So Tantalus would hunger and thirst for all eternity, with food and drink always within his reach, but never in his grasp. As you probably know, the name Tantalus has provided the inspiration for our English word, tantalize.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John (5:1-9) we've heard the story of someone else trapped in a pool, and the healing miracle that Jesus performed to get him out of it. The story contains a number of features that distinguish it from other Gospel accounts of Jesus' curing the sick. The first is the curious pool named Bethesda that John tells us was near the Sheep Gate into the city. In fact, archeologists have excavated the site and unearthed the pool right where John said it would be. Long before the days of Jesus the pool had a reputation for being a place of healing. Jews as well as pagans attributed mystical power to the waters, and people with all sorts of diseases would come to it edges hoping to be made well. The pool was apparently fed by a natural spring that would bubble up at intervals, stirring or "troubling" the water. The legend was that when the water stirred, the first one into the pool would be cured. If you weren't cured it must have been that someone else jumped in ahead of you. Stick around and try again.

The second distinguishing feature of the healing miracle is that one man had been at the pool for 38 years. Try to comprehend it. Where were you, and what were you doing in May of 1984 – 38 years ago? Can you remember? Were you even born? True, 38 years is not the eternity that Tantalus spent reaching in futility for a drop of water to drink, but it's still half of a lifetime. For 38 years, for half a lifetime, the man had been tantalized by the pool of Bethesda, stooping in his eagerness to touch the troubled waters, but always failing to be first.

Finally, a third distinguishing feature of the healing is the question that Jesus asked the man by the pool: "*Do you want to be made well?*" Shouldn't the answer be obvious? Shouldn't the man respond with a resounding, "*Yes! Of course I want to be made well! Why else would I be waiting here all these years?*" But the man didn't really answer the question at all, did he?

Instead, he tried to explain, or even make an excuse for why he wasn't healed. He said, "*Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.*" As you heard, *Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."* At once the man was made well. He took up his mat and walked. One would think he'd be thrilled, but the text of John's Gospel beyond where we read today suggests that the man was ultimately ambivalent about what Jesus did for him. John mentions no rejoicing and no gratitude. What is more, when the Jewish officials accused the man of breaking the Sabbath law by carrying his mat, he blamed Jesus. The impression we get is that the man would have preferred that Jesus had simply left him alone so that he could stay by the side of the pool.

Why? What accounts for an attraction to the pool so strong that the man would spend 38 years in its grip, and then regret being freed to leave? Why do some people love the darkness and not the light? These are questions without any clear answers. But if we are to understand how Jesus set the man free, then we need to know what held him down. We assume that the man was lame, but John only refers to him as sick, and never specifically says that physical paralysis was his problem. For all we know, it was a paralysis of the will that immobilized the man. After 38 years of doing the same old thing he'd simply settled into the routine. He'd concluded that the culture around the Bethesda pool was as good as it was going to get for him.

Or perhaps the sickness that paralyzed the man was an illness of the mind. It could be that he had an addictive personality. The elusive promises of the Bethesda pool froze him in place in the same way a slot machine might paralyze a gambler today. Can you overhear the thinking? *Tomorrow I'll be first into the pool ... One more token into the slot machine and it's bound to pay off ... If I stop now all the years, all the money I've invested will go to waste ... I've put too much into this to walk away now.* So the man pressed on, never realizing that no matter how far he'd traveled down the wrong road, the time to stop, the time to turn around, the time to repent was now. A new and abundant life awaited him away from the pool.

In 1992 the political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote a compelling book entitled The End of History and the Last Man. Fukuyama's thesis was that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union indicated that humankind had finally and forever chosen the light and not the darkness. We had turned onto the right road at last. Indeed, the worldwide embrace of western liberal democracy represented the pinnacle – or the end point – of human history. It was a tantalizing theory, but not everyone agreed with its premise or aspired to its promise. In Russia a mid-level KGB agent named Vladimir Putin came to view the demise of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century. His goal would be to restore the Russian empire. Can you overhear the thinking? *Let's give tyranny, unprovoked aggression, and war crimes one more try. It's never worked before but it's bound to pay off this time.* Alas, the water of life and the fruit within our sight have eluded our grasp again as the healing of the nations is tossed to the shadowy clouds. This week a Russian military analyst dared to say on state controlled TV: "Practically the whole world is against us ... and we need to get out of this situation."

Likewise, Jesus knew that the man by the Bethesda pool needed to get out of that situation. The man didn't see it but Jesus did. So perhaps the miracle Jesus worked was more of a spiritual healing than a physical cure. The voice of the Lord called across the waters, and freed the man from the tangled web of illness that ensnared him. I think of some verses from Psalm 29: *The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the Lord is upon the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.* When the man by the side of the pool heard the voice of the Lord calling him away from his fruitless endeavors of the past 38 years, it was as if a great vision of clarity suddenly flashed before his eyes. He realized that the only thing worse than sitting by the side of the pool for 38 years would be putting in one more year and making it 39. He heard and heeded the voice of the Lord.

Is it possible for us, today, to hear the voice of the Lord? It most definitely is. To be sure, we don't see the Lord face-to-face as did the man at Bethesda. By faith we hear the voice of the Lord calling to us in the goodness and love made known in creation. We hear the voice of the Lord in his Word spoken through the prophets. We hear him in the Scriptures. We hear him in prayer. We hear him in the jumble of Christian community, where two or three gather together in his name. What is he saying? Follow me. No matter how far you've travelled down a fruitless path, the time to turn around is today. The time to follow Jesus is today. Where does he lead us? Not to endless futility, but to the water of life, provided by our living, loving, longsuffering heavenly Father. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

In the summers when I was growing up my family would rent a ramshackle cabin on Lake Grinnell, in Sparta, NJ. The water of the lake was so clear you could see right to the bottom, and it was filled with fish. Rumor had it that schools of gigantic, large mouth bass were down there, and my brothers and I were determined to catch one. In the evenings the surface of the lake was as smooth as glass so that voices carried easily across the water, and everyone could hear what everyone else was saying. After supper I would take the row boat out for yet another try at catching the monster fish. Often I felt the line go tight, and was sure the biggest bass of them all had swallowed my lure. It was my job then to be patient. If I pulled too hard the lure might pop out of the fish's mouth and it would get away. So I would wait. I would prevail. The payoff would make it all worthwhile.

Always, after what seemed like hours of deadlock, darkness would descend and I would hear the voice of my father calling across the water from the other side of the lake: time to come home. "But Dad," I would say, "I've got a big one on the line. Really, this time I do." "Pull him in, then, and come home," would be the reply for all the lake to hear. I would protest, but my father's disembodied voice was upon the waters. Reluctantly I would pull hard on the line, sure that I was throwing away an entire evening's worth of master angling. When I felt the lure let loose I'd reel in the line, and every time – every time – attached to the hooks would be a clump of weeds. No amount of waiting was ever going to turn those weeds into a large mouth bass.

The voice across the waters set me free from a futile effort, set me free to go home. The voice of the Lord spoke to the man by the Bethesda pool and set him free. Likewise, the voice of the Lord is upon the waters of your life. The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice. The voice of the Lord speaks and sets us free.

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