

“When Gates Are Open”
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Acts 16:9-15
John 5:1-9

When I was comparing these two texts, I was drawn to an image that linked the two stories: A gate. In John, we encounter Jesus at Sheep’s Gate– this was the gate of entry for sheep that had been bought at market, to be used in temple sacrifice. Apparently this entryway was also wear those too weak, sick, injured, or otherwise disabled to enter the Temple hung out, for there at Bethesda– which means in Hebrew House of Mercy– stood pools, which went deep below street level, where people believed miracle healings could happen. Archaeologists have excavated that exact site, and deep within they discovered artifacts that point to an even earlier pagan sanctuary, a Temple to Asclepius, the Greek hero and god of Medicine.

The other gate we hear today comes in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul has come to Macedonia, because in a vision he heard a man pleading with him to go there. This was on Paul’s second missionary journey, and it was the first time he had left Asia Minor, and had set foot on European soil, to tell the story of Jesus. In the city of Philippi, Paul wandered the city for several days, until he decided to step outside the gate of the city. It was the Sabbath. There, just outside the gate, he found a community of women who were gathered by the river to pray. Paul told them a story about Jesus. Lydia found it compelling, and that day, she and her entire household were baptized. The church in Philippi– where we get Paul’s letter to the Philippians, began with that first Christian convert in Europe, a woman, provided lodging and a gateway through which Christianity would spread throughout Europe.

So today I come to you thinking about gateways. Where are those spaces where we pass through, and everything changes? When I lived down south, I would visit every summer at Montreat, which is a Presbyterian Conference Center in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. If you ever get the chance, I hope you will go! To enter Montreat, the road went through an arched gate, made of mountain river stones. That gate always symbolized to me an opening of heart, because I knew that I was entering a thin place, a space where I could be found by God.

As many of you know, I spent last week in Denver at the Festival of Homiletics; for a week, I heard at least 12 sermons from what I consider many of the best preachers in the country. After I got done fangirling these amazing preachers, I come back and am faced with Paul, who not only preaches the first sermon about Jesus in Europe that had ever been preached– up to that point, the good news had only been circulating around Asia Minor– Paul also did it so successfully that Lydia, and her whole entire household, were moved to be baptized.

Then God turned to me and said, “Okay, Preacher, now *you* go!”

As I humbly take my turn back at the pulpit, I am at least comforted that Paul did not always hit it with his sermons. I can look back on some of his letters and see where I am sure he was utterly wrong. Also, there was that one sermon he preached, reported in Acts 20, when he bored the teenager Eutychus so much that his sermon put the youth to sleep and the kid fell off the roof from which he was listening, and died. Paul had the power to un-dead the youth, which he did, which I guess makes up for it, but still– I’d rather not go through that to begin with.

I think about the man who sat alongside the healing pool at Sheep's Gate in the gospel story. For 38 years he had been ill, and perhaps it was for that long that he had been lying beside the pool, trying to muster the strength to lower himself in the waters at just the right time, to find his healing. At this pool, it was believed, an angel would descend and touch the water, troubling its surface. The people believed that the first person to descend into the waters after the angel had troubled it could receive miraculous healing. However, each time this sick man started to make his way to the water, someone stronger would beat him to it. I’m not sure who this angel was, but their spa system was *wrecked*.

I remember those first shopping trips of the pandemic. I took that 6 feet of distance very seriously. And so when I wanted to get to the cooler to reach for milk, but someone else was already there, selecting milk, I would patiently wait– 6 feet away– until the first person finished. Inevitably, however, 2 more people would reach in for milk as soon as a space opened up. I missed what I perceived to be the gateway to my moment of safety.

It’s not nearly as drastic as someone who has been waiting for a chance at healing for 38 years only to be repeatedly passed over by those who are less sick or injured. Besides, lots has changed with the pandemic and I’m certainly no longer afraid to grocery shop in close proximity to others, even if we are reaching for the same carton of milk.

But as for the man at Sheep’s Gate, he kept waiting, trying to get the timing *just right* to enter that healing pool. But the moment kept slipping past him, just beyond his reach.

Until Jesus, a stranger, asks the sick man a question: “Do you want to be made well?” Duh, *Jesus*. The question almost seems to mock this man whom, we can imagine, has spent most of his life searching for wellness. Perhaps that is why instead of answering Jesus, the man launches into all the reasons he has not been able to be made well– I’m trying to find the right moment; I’m trying to muster the strength to drag my body to the pool and lower myself to it; Each time, someone pushes in front of me and gets there first. Every. Single. Time.

But the man’s answer, and his faith, don’t really matter to Jesus. This time, there is no pronouncement, “Your faith has made you well.” Instead, Jesus lets the man know the pool has nothing to do with his healing. “Pick up your mat. Stand up. Walk.” The pool was bypassed altogether. And though it was the sabbath, when carrying mats around would be forbidden, and healing would be forbidden, the man takes heed of Jesus’ instructions, and walks away.

I wonder if you ever feel a taste of the frustration this paralyzed man felt when, time after time, he did the thing that he had been told could bring about the miracle of his healing... and it just never worked. When have you stood at the gate, waiting to find healing, waiting to find love, waiting to be seen, waiting for peace, waiting for justice, waiting to find redemption? And time after time, you witnessed it just passing you by, just... out of your reach.

Maybe you wonder to yourself: maybe I am a person who does not deserve wellness. Maybe I am a person who does not deserve love. Maybe I am meant to be invisible. Maybe peace, justice, are not to be found in this lifetime. Maybe I am a person who is beyond redemption.

As a preacher, I find it hard not to see each Sunday as a gateway. If the preacher gets her timing just right, so that profound words pass over at the *exact* moment that you listeners in the pews bubble up with whatever you have brought with you this day: your pain, your fears, your deepest longing, then that sermon will be a gateway to finding Christ and changing lives, even changing the world— like Paul did. I know / have experienced sermons that have impacted me like that. I could probably count them on one hand, but these sermons have literally changed my life. It certainly helps if a cell-phone doesn't ring and throw off that precise moment altogether.

But I wonder if that transformative encounter is more mysterious than that. It is a grace beyond anyone's control— not the preacher's, not the listeners'.

There ***is*** a gateway where the holy meets us. The truth is, however, these gateways are all around us. We may not see them, but they are there. The deceptive reality is that these gateways are actually not that remarkable. They don't have to be made from river stones from the Blue Ridge Mountains. They do not have to be the gateways through which sheep pass for ritual sacrifice, or gateways that lead to pools passed over by angels, or gateways that lead to... the whole of Europe.

Sometimes, something as simple as your breath can be a gateway to find the holy. Ah! It is true that Jesus breathed upon his disciples after the resurrection and told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." When was the last time you simply sat in your breath and welcomed the holy? Ah!

I wonder how often we pass right on by gateways to the holy because we are so busy looking for remarkable experiences of the holy, that we miss out on the ordinary experiences of the holy.

May you be granted today entry through the gateway where you find the holy and the holy finds you. May you find, in small and large ways, an opening to your wellness. An opening where you know you are loved. An opening to your inner peace, and an even broader peace and justice. An opening where you can be seen and accepted— truly, unapologetically, for who you are. May you find the gateway to your redemption and that of the world. It is waiting for you. It is waiting for us. Already. Amen.

