

Have you ever had to wait a long time for something that you really wanted to happen?

In my senior year of college, I applied to Duke Divinity School. After the deadline to apply passed I would make the long hike up the hill to my mailbox each day. Rain, snow, or shine I would walk up the hill and with great anticipation I would unlock my mailbox to see if I had received any word from Duke.

Day after day I was disappointed as the mailbox was empty, but I kept checking it anyway. When I went home for winter break, I was sad because I realized I would not be able to check my mail each day and I thought I would miss an important letter.

Over that winter break I received a phone call that I got into Duke Divinity School. They were never going to send a letter of admission because they switched to calling students years ago followed up by an email. In that moment I realized I was waiting for something that was never going to happen.

I think we have all have had these moments. Sometimes we want things to happen so badly that we do things that give us a sense of control. No one likes to wait, and yet it is in this time of waiting that we too can experience the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.

As we begin the second week in our “Healing Stories of Jesus” sermon series we give thanks to God that Jesus seeks out those who are waiting for healing. Last week we celebrated that we as the community of Christ are invited into Christ’s healing ministry. Today we see that Christ also works despite us and offers healing to those who are desperately in need of it through their faith in Him.

Our Scripture for today from John 5 teaches us that Christ’s healing comes to a man who waited a long time to experience it. Scripture tells us this man had waited 38 years to be healed beside the healing waters of the pool of Beth-zatha.

This pool had healing properties and when its waters were stirred the first person to touch the healing bubbles would experience healing. These people who were severely disabled would have the help of their family and friends who could quickly get them to the exact spot in the pool where they needed to be.

It must have been so difficult for this man to watch others be healed and not him. I wonder if he secretly said to God: “Why not me?” I know that we also ask God this question about ourselves and others as we wait for healing. It is hard to wait.

That day at the pool, that man did not have anyone to help him, so he had no way of being healed in that place and yet he continued to hope for healing. He continued to show up every day hoping for a miracle.

In his book “The Healing Stories of Jesus” Louis Grams shares: “Day after day, he is lying there on his crude bed with a mixed sense of hope and resignation. With his disability, the pool might as well be miles away. The possibility is so close at hand, and yet it seems impossibly distant and remote.”¹

What is beautiful about this Scripture is the way Jesus engages this man first among the crowd. Commentary tells us that Jesus had the intuition to know that this man had been waiting a long time to be healed.² So Jesus went straight to him and asked him a simple question.

Jesus asked the man if he wants to be made well. It may seem strange to us that Jesus asks this question, but Grams reminds us that “living with unfulfilled hope does strange things to the mind and heart. Resignation can turn into doubt, doubt to disbelief, and disbelief can rob one of even the desire to be healed.”³

When Jesus realizes that the man still desires to be healed, he responds immediately and tells the man to “take up his mat and walk.”⁴ Immediately the man is healed and begins to walk. What an amazing miracle of Jesus Christ! The man who had been helplessly watching the pool is now able to walk on his own.

Through this moment of healing the man has his life back. He can now move into a new chapter, a chapter that he thought would never come. You would think that this would be the best day in this man’s life, but immediately his community turns against him.

Instead of celebrating with him that he has been healed they give him grief for carrying his mat and “working on the sabbath.” The man retells his story of healing which you think would be compelling to all who heard it, and yet these religious leaders use this information to form a plot to kill Jesus.⁵

So often we ask for Jesus’ complete healing of our lives. We want everything to be made new. Yet Grams reminds us that “Being healed does not necessarily mean stepping into a new life without any troubles!”⁶

We, like the community of the Bible, have a decision of how we will respond to Christ’s healing ministry in our lives. Will we receive it with joy? Or will we fail to respond as we get distracted by all the difficult things going on in the world?

As I was reflecting on this Scripture to prepare for this sermon it made me a little sad. Here was this wonderful event that happened in the life of this man who waited 38 years to be healed, but his community chose to focus on something completely different. By not celebrating the healing of Jesus Christ, this community was unable to realize that God was being active in the world through the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.

We see this phenomenon, but we also must admit that we too are not always attuned to Christ’s healing ministry in the world. We get hung up on the things that directly affect us and miss out on what God is doing in the lives of those around us.

Grams names the world we live in as one of “instant gratification;” a world where we want God to work within our framework and not the other way around. Our Scripture for today reminds us that God does not work within the parameters that we set up for God. Christ’s healing cannot be contained and does not happen on demand.

Our Scripture for today from Isaiah 40 and Psalm 130 reminds us that to embody our faith in Jesus Christ means that God will also call us to wait. None of us like to wait, but it is in the waiting that we continue to grow in our discipleship and become able to identify Christ’s healing ministry in the world.

The prophet Isaiah encourages us when he says: “...but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”⁷ In Psalm 130:5-6 God’s people are waiting for redemption. The psalmist writes: I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

Yes, part of embodying our faith in Christ means that we are called to wait. The Israelites waited 40 years to find the Promised Land. Noah waited forty days and nights at sea during the flood. The disciples had to wait three days for Jesus to be resurrected from the dead and fifty days to experience the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we, too, are called to wait, but we do not wait without hope. We hear this hope in the words of Psalm 130. We see this hope embodied in the man who waited 38 years to be healed. We experience this hope in those who are sick today who still pray for Christ’s healing with every breath that they have left.

In our lives today we are in a time of waiting. We don't know how long this pandemic will go on. Sometimes it may seem like it will never end, and yet even in this time of waiting, we, too, are called to put our hope in God.

In periods of waiting God prepares us for future ministry. Last week we talked about how Jesus Christ started his ministry by waiting 40 days in the wilderness. There in the wilderness he was further equipped to be the living word of God to the world.

We are called to make use of this time of waiting. The one blessing in this time of has been that we have had more time to breathe. Everything has been cancelled and although that has brought us all sadness, it has also brought us a lot more rest.

During this season, we are called to remember who we are uniquely as each church, and further discern how God is calling us to serve. What is God calling us to do now as the Rappahannock Charge? How can we continue to respond to the needs of our community? And what is God calling us to do in the future and how can we do it even better?

This past week I heard the minutes read from one of our Council meetings in February and I found myself lamenting about all the cancelled events for this year. But my hope was peaked by the things that we were doing before the pandemic, and the work that God continues to call us to do.

One thing that has been on my heart as your pastor is to continue to find a way that we can be involved in the Food Pantry of Rappahannock County. This is a project I hope we can continue to get involved in as the pandemic ceases to grip our day to day lives.

Today I believe God is continuing to teach us about Christ's healing, even during this pandemic. But are our eyes open to what God is doing in the world that is life-giving? Or are we distracted by all the bad news of the world?

The good news for our lives today is that God is calling us to wait with hope.

We hear this same hope when we say the words in our communion liturgy as we respond together: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”⁸

We say these words each time we have communion and we, too, wait in hope that Christ will come again in victory to heal the entire world.

In the meantime, we are called to wait in hope, and celebrate anytime we experience Christ’s healing in our lives and in the lives of those we love. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Louis Grams. “The Healing Stories of Jesus: Signs of God’s New Creation.” The Word Among Us Press. Fredrick, Maryland. 2016. P. 27-28.

² Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. VIII.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 242.

³ Ibid. P. 28.

⁴ John 5:8. NRSV.

⁵ Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. VIII.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 243.

⁶ Louis Grams. “The Healing Stories of Jesus: Signs of God’s New Creation.” The Word Among Us Press. Fredrick, Maryland. 2016. P. 27-28.

⁷ Isaiah 40:21. NRSV.

⁸ “The United Methodist Hymnal. United Methodist Publishing House. 1989. P. 10.