
“For God so loved the world.” That simple phrase comes two chapters before today’s gospel reading, and it captures the essence of the entire Bible as well as any other… “For God so loved the world.”… God loves the whole world – not just the people in the Bible stories…. Not just people that go to church… Not just people that live in this country. +++ That’s has been the direction of God’s love and mercy from the very beginning: At Creation, there is no distinction – God says “it’s all very good.” And then, when the mysterious primeval portion of Genesis begins to coalesce around the Lord’s walk through history with Abraham and Sarah and the generations that follow them, God’s first call to Abraham includes this promise: “…in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” +++ Now, to be sure, the path has not always been straight or easy. The history of Abraham’s descendants, the people of Israel, is filled with fits and starts – successes and failures – obedience and waywardness… all the while leading to something… to someone… to put the whole thing together. As time went on, prophecies and expectations looked more and more to a coming Messiah – a Savior for the Whole World. +++ And, of course, the history of God’s people continues beyond the Old Testament – into centuries captured, in part, by the Apocryphal writings – and finally into Bethlehem – when God takes human form… and comes into the earth to finally save it once and for all. +++ So long expected – so long needed – yet so surprising because of the astonishing things he said and did – when Jesus Christ finally stepped into history. ++++

God’s blessings and sovereignty for the whole world is the topic of our Psalm today: “Let all the peoples praise you, O God… Let the nations be glad and sing for joy… May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.” +++ The psalm captures the mixture of God’s Power – the Earth – and Blessings – that is present at Creation, when the universal nature of God’s love, generosity, and power is first portrayed and most clearly revealed. +++ And the psalm reminds us that the Lord has a home here … with us – is interested in our world – is active among us. +++ None of that changes with arrival of Christ. If anything, it becomes more clear as he travels the countryside teaching,… healing,… demonstrating how to love unconditionally,… and showing up when he’s least expected to change people’s lives forever.

That’s what happens when he appears at the pool by the Sheep Gate in today’s gospel reading. It’s such a strange setting – where people with debilitating long-term illnesses are waiting by the waters of the pool for a chance to be healed by the waters. +++ If you were following along in the pew Bible, you might have noticed something unusual about the passage: there is no verse 4. ((Yeah – look it up and see for yourself…)) Scholars have evidence that the missing verse had been added by an editor that thought there should be some explanation for the pool – and then it was removed later by another editor. The verse described some supernatural qualities of the water, and read like this: “For [from time to time] an angel of the Lord used to come down in the pool, and the water was stirred up. Accordingly, the first one to enter [after the stirring of the water] was cured of whatever sickness he had.” The verse was omitted because it inappropriately links a superstitious belief in the power of the pool to the power of God. But the missing verse does make sense in the narrative because it explains why it’s such a problem when someone else always steps down into the water ahead of him. +++ This man – who is unable even to get up from his mat – nevertheless waits by a pool which he believes can only heal him if he is the first into it after the waters ripple – which he will never be able to do! It’s a hopeless situation – all the more hopeless, as would be understood by the earliest readers of the gospel, all the more hopeless because we know there was no real power there to heal him even if he had been the first into the water. ++++ So, what happens? When Jesus sees the man by the pool, he knows he has been there a long time and asks him a simple question: “Do you want to be made well?” +++ I think it’s telling that the sick man does not answer the question Jesus asked him – he doesn’t say he wants to be healed. Instead he explains why it’s impossible for him to be healed.: “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.” ++++ This superstitious man gave up hope long ago – he doesn’t believe he will be healed – doesn’t believe he can be healed… But he keeps coming back anyway – day after day. +++ When Jesus speaks to him, he has no idea who Jesus is – he doesn’t sense Christ’s power like many others do. +++ And Jesus doesn’t criticize him for it – doesn’t condemn him for believing the superstitions about the pool… – he doesn’t judge the man – he just loves him – and heals him. “Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.” +++ Then, of course, the religious leaders get involved and the issue becomes all about Jesus doing such things on the Sabbath. ++++
But in that moment – you have to think about the change in that man’s life. +++ Jesus shows up so suddenly sometimes, doesn’t he?... When he is least expected?... I think about that morning, that started out like every other morning for the debilitated man – a man who felt alone – who had no support group – who had not found relief in his religious traditions – whose leaders were more interested in obedience than love. When he woke up that morning, he had every reason to despair. He had no idea that Christ was poised to enter his life and change everything – and because he wasn’t ready for it – he didn’t even recognize it when it happened. He just took up his mat and walked away – without saying another word to the man who had just healed him. +++ +++ And that’s how Jesus starts **blessing the world**: healing pain, teaching the Good News – right there in his home country – among his own people – people who thought they were ready for the Messiah but then don’t know what to make of him when he arrived. Either they don’t recognize that his signs and miracles mean anything at all – or they can’t understand what it all means... or who he is. +++ The light bulbs aren’t going off in the heads of many people – and so Jesus was not received as he deserved to be – as he could have been. He wasn’t yet **WELCOMED** into the homes and hearts of many people – and so the going was slow – and hard – and dangerous.

Let’s fast forward a few years later – to our narrative from Acts, after Jesus has completed his physical time on earth. By all logic, you’d **expect** this town of Philippi – on the far shores of Macedonia – Greece – would be a much less receptive audience for Paul – than the Holy City Jerusalem itself had been for Jesus Christ. +++ But that was not the case – thanks to Lydia. Lydia was a member of the Jewish community in Philippi – and as soon as she heard what Paul had to say about Jesus – she believed! It’s important to take notice that when the Lord opened her heart, **this woman** became the first Christian convert on the European Continent – she and her entire household were baptized – and she **welcomed** Paul to come and stay in her home. +++ It is an important moment in the fulfillment of Christ’s Great Commission to the disciples, “that repentance and forgiveness of sins... be proclaimed in his name to **all nations.**” And, it responds to his call in the opening verses of Acts to “receive power... and be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria and **unto the uttermost parts of the earth.**” After the events in today’s reading, they are well on their way.

+++++++Why were these two moments so different? Like the man by the pool, I don’t expect Lydia woke up that morning anticipating that God was going to turn her life around through Paul. But she was a person of faith, who went regularly to a place of prayer by the river, where she met Paul. And I wonder if **every time** she went to those waters she **did** expect God to do **something** in her life – unlike the man in Jerusalem who went to the water **in despair** each day, having given up on his dream of being healed. **Lydia was ready** when the Holy Spirit brought her to Paul – when his words connected with her, and she welcomed him into her home. +++ Lydia’s welcoming Paul was the beginning of the church in Philippi. Later, when he was released from prison, Paul and Silas returned to Lydia’s home – where they encouraged the brothers and sisters there. +++ Lydia had started a church in her home – and God’s blessings to the whole world through the descendants of Abraham and Sarah – promised so long ago – took a major step forward into a new continent – by the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. +++

**Lydia is a true Biblical hero!** She doesn’t just shake Paul’s hand that morning and tell him it was a good message before returning to her usual routine... She opens her **heart**, her **life**, and her **home** to the work of the Holy Spirit. She **WELCOMES** this new message – the Word of Jesus Christ – into her home and **starts a church**. **Lydia sets an example for us all!** +++ Christ shows up for us all – sometimes **when we least expect**. +++ Whether, like the man at the pool, you feel the despair of sitting and waiting for something to happen which you actually gave up on long ago – or whether you get up and come to worship regularly like Lydia:: God can always enter your life when you least expect it. +++ Perhaps you’ll suddenly feel motivated to get involved in a cause – or a particular social injustice calls out to your heart. Maybe one day it will dawn on you to do something about children who need to be tutored, residents of nursing homes who need to be visited, or even flowers that need to be watered. +++ These are the moments when Christ calls to you to action. They don’t come all at once – they come one at a time – and you are often surprised by them. +++ Lydia calls you to welcome them into your heart and home – welcome Christ each time he visits – and challenge yourself by asking him – “**What shall I do for you?**” And then, **do** what he asks you to do. +++ If we could all do that, then – **one visit at a time** – **One Welcome at a Time** – we would truly bless the whole world with the grace, the compassion, and the generosity, of our Loving God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.