

A Storytelling Commentary on John 5:1-9

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The story of the healing of the man by the sheep gate, Bethzatha, is John's version of the story of the healing a paralytic. John's version is very distinctive and is highly dramatic in relation to the story itself and what follows this story. I will discuss the relationship between this story and what follows in this commentary.

The mnemonic structure of this story is relatively simple. The first episode provides the setting in Jerusalem by the sheep gate. The second episode describes the scene at the pool of Bethzatha: many invalids and a man who had been there for 38 years. It's just fine to really emphasize "THIRTY-EIGHT-YEARS" that he had been laying at this pool. The next episode is Jesus' question to the man—"Do you want to be made well?"—and his response. The final episode is Jesus healing him. The episodes of the story have a very clear structure.

Despair and discouragement were an inherent part of the place where this story occurs: the pool by the Sheep Gate at Bethzatha. The dynamic of the story is that a man who had no hope, endlessly reciting the reasons why he could not be healed, moves from his own despair and discouragement to being healed suddenly after 38 years of laying in wait at the pool unable to get into it.

I suggest that you tell the first two episodes as highly depressing. Don't just report this in an objective tone but rather tell it imagining a place of pain and misery where invalids lay for years at a time in the hope that they might be made well. It's a kind of pathetic hospital because there was no hope for these people.

Jesus' recognition of the man's situation is the first glimmer of light in the whole story. Jesus' question is based on an inside view of Jesus: "When Jesus saw him laying there..." We therefore see the man through Jesus' eyes, and we know what he knew. He knew that the man had been there a long time.

The storyteller has told us that he's been there for 38 years, but Jesus didn't know how long he had been there. He had, however, recognized that he had been there a long time. He asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" This is reminiscent to Jesus' question to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Jesus honors him by not assuming what he wants, but asking him whether he wants to be made well, or in effect whether he simply wants to remain where he is. It is a profound question because the reality is that many people who are sick would actually prefer to stay in their present situation which is known and familiar rather than to risk the possibilities of what would be involved in getting well.

The man's answer to Jesus' question is not "Yes." Rather, he recites all the reasons why he can't be made well. Thus, the characterization of the lame man is a characterization of a whiner who is full of self-pity— a kind of walking martyr who not only is without hope, but also has built a series of rationalizations and explanations for why his hopelessness is justified. All of which is fully understandable.

This story is particularly striking in the context of the other stories of the Gospels. Jesus' healings are usually in response to faith and confidence on the part of the one who is healed. This guy has no faith; he has no confidence in Jesus. He doesn't ask Jesus to heal him; nobody took him to Jesus. Jesus found him and asked him if he wanted to be made well and his answer is to whine about all the reasons he can't get into the pool. Jesus' action is an initiative that cuts through this man's despair. In light of what happens later, it is also clear that Jesus doesn't care about the fact that it is the Sabbath, which may get him in trouble. He simply heals the man and goes on his way.

The Pharisees ask the man why he is carrying his mat, which is against the law. The man responds by saying that, "the man who healed me told me to get up and walk." Then Jesus finds him and the man goes back and tells the authorities that it was Jesus. As a result, Jesus gets in an enormous amount of trouble.

The remainder of Chapter 5 is a description of the discourse between Jesus and the Jews who wanted to kill him. They had two motives for their desire to kill him: (1) he had healed on the Sabbath, and (2) he was implying that God was his father.

The impact of this story is not dependent on the consequences of the healing. Jesus is apparently unconcerned about Sabbath laws. The impact of the story is that the healing is a sign of Jesus' authority and power, which is not even dependent on what the healed person subsequently does.

In the preceding story, the official and his family all believed in Jesus after he raised his son and brought him back to life. In this story there is nothing about the one who is healed believing in Jesus or following him or even being grateful for what Jesus had done.

This is rather a sign of Jesus' authority to interpret the law in light of the needs of people without any dependence on whether or not they believe in him. I suggest that you tell this story as a strong story of Jesus' power, of his strength, and of his ability to transform people's lives even when they do not particularly want it. It's a very striking healing story.