

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Signs and Wonders: The Good News of Missed Windows”
John 5:1-15

“Signs and Wonders.” That’s the series we’re continuing, looking at Jesus’s miracles in the Gospel of John, miracles which John sometimes refers to as “signs,” acts that are not only miraculous but point to Jesus, reveal something about who he is, so that, as John tells us later in his Gospel, you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. That’s the whole purpose for these signs: pointing to Jesus so that you might believe and have life.

We’re on the third sign this week, another miraculous healing. This third one has a backstory of almost forty years, and it makes you wonder, why did it have to take so long? Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.
Amen.

One day I nearly punched one of my good friends, because what he had done was simply inexcusable. He had known that this really cute girl had taken a shine to me, and he didn’t let me know. I mean, help a brother out.

A few years earlier, the summer before my last year in college, I had been put in touch with an incoming freshman from a small town in south Georgia who was coming into town for first-year orientation. He was interested in rush, which was the reason we had gotten connected, and so we found a time to get a cup of coffee. But before we got together, he asked, “Can I bring a friend from home?” Now I assumed at this point that this friend was another guy who might also be interested in rush, so I said, “Sure, why not.”

We meet up, and I discover that this friend wasn’t another guy, but this really cute girl. The three of us had a nice conversation about this and that, all the while I was trying to get a read on this girl, but with little success. We finish our coffee and go our separate ways. The guy and I end up becoming good friends soon after that, but the girl I just ended up running into a few times over the course of that year, and that was it. Didn’t pick up any kind of sign.

A few years later, I was talking to this same friend, and somehow that same girl came up in conversation, and he tells me, “Oh yeah, she really liked you man.” And I nearly punched him in the face. I mean, help a brother out.

And that’s how Frances and I met. For some time after my friend offered that little revelation, I kicked myself and left it just at, well, missed my window on that one.

It wouldn’t be until five or six years later before Frances and I got reconnected, and that’s another story, maybe in another sermon—we’ll see if this one gets me into trouble first. But since then, when we’ve reminisced blissfully on the past, wondering why it had to take so long, we’ve reflected on what would’ve happened if we had ended up dating back then. And we’re

both fairly certain that it wouldn't have worked out. Different stage in life, a lot of growing up to do—for me at least—probably wouldn't have worked out. So, thank God for missed windows.

Now that little story encompasses about nine years, five of them spent beating myself up for missing my window. Felt like a long time to me. But repeat that four times, and that's how long the man by the pool kicked himself for missing his window. And not just once, but over and over and over again.

Here's what's going on. Jesus is back in Jerusalem. (Jesus travels quick in John's Gospel.) He comes to a pool on the northern side of the city, where he comes upon a man who had been lying in the porches around the pool for thirty-eight years.

Thirty-eight years. That's more than my lifetime. Think back thirty-eight years ago, back to the beginning of 2020—you might be like me and 38 years has you covered—but think back over that many years and how much you have changed and how much things have changed, and then consider spending all of that time lying stuck on a crowded porch, with cots and mats in every spare inch of space, along with dozens, maybe hundreds of others, the sick, the blind, the lame, the paralyzed, all crowded around this pool. That's where this man is. That's where this man has been for quite some time. Thirty-eight years.

And why's he been waiting there? He says because he's never had someone to put him into the pool when the water was stirred up, and someone always gets in ahead of him. Now that seems kind of a strange reason to stay by a pool for thirty-eight years. But this is why. If you look closely in your Bibles or on your phones, you might notice something odd. The story skips from verse three to verse five, in some translations at least. If the version you're reading, like the one we read, is missing verse four, you'll probably see a little footnote at the bottom of the page with that mysterious fourth verse in it. It says that an angel would come on occasion to "stir" or "trouble" the water in the pool, and whoever was the first into the water after it was stirred would be healed. Now, there's reason to believe that this was probably added later, which makes me a bit more comfortable in offering what could be a more scientific explanation: that really the pool just sat over a spring or natural vent, and every so often bubbles would inexplicably appear, and the whole thing about angels was just common belief.

But that's why, for this man at least, getting skipped over into the pool was such a big deal. For this man, this pool was his chance to be well, to be healed, maybe to be whole, to be happy, and every time someone else got into the water before him, it meant to him that he had missed his window over and over and over. For thirty-eight years.

For years he's watched as countless others come and go, and whether by help or ability, they seemed to find healing before he did. That's kind of messed up, isn't it, this first-to-the-finish-line system of healing. I mean, as long as we might have to wait in line these days for voting, at least it's a line; at least it's fair. Can you imagine if voting was done by randomly opening up the voting station, but only the first ten people who got there could vote each time? That's what this is like. It means that those most in need of healing are precisely the ones who don't get healed, and that's a system that's out of whack. And he's watched this go on for years.

That's not all he's watched. Also mixed into the crowd around the pool are some religious leaders. Are they there helping the sick? No. It appears that they're just there to make sure everyone follows the rules. Case in point, when this man is miraculously healed by Jesus, do they rejoice and celebrate? No. They point out that he shouldn't be carrying his mat, because that constitutes work on the Sabbath. He's watched this go on for years.

Then comes this man Jesus, who asks him a question that it seems no one in nearly forty years had ever thought to ask: "Do you want to be made well?" He tells him a bit of his story,

and Jesus responds, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” And that’s exactly what the man does. Did you notice what Jesus didn’t do? He didn’t take the man down to the pool to be healed by random bubbles, nor did he check with the hypocrites to see if it followed all the rules for the Sabbath. Thirty-eight years of this man watching this distorted system function, patrolled by self-righteous zealots confusing policing for piety, thirty-eight years of feeling like he’s missed his window to be healed and made whole again and again and again, and then this man Jesus comes and bids him stand and walk. And it was amazing, the third of Christ’s signs.

But I’m guessing at some point this question comes to the man’s mind: why’d it have to take so long?

You might have the same question, not just about this man’s story, but about your own: why does it have to take so long? I mean, let’s face it, not every story is a nice boy meets girl in a coffee shop thing. It’s nice to sometimes be able to look back and recognize how missed windows and missed opportunities ultimately led to an even better outcome, and you might be able to think of a few examples of that in your life, and they are blessings, to be sure.

But that’s not something we always can see, not in the present, not in hindsight either. You might think back to missed windows or missed opportunities, maybe something years ago, a relationship, a decision, a mistake; or maybe something this year, the long-term consequences for which you can’t even begin to understand. Whatever they are: chances you had to be whole, and that’s all they are: missed, and the most you can muster about them is frustration, maybe regret, maybe bitterness.

Can’t say I could’ve blamed this man if any of those sentiments sneaked into the mix, and I don’t think I could say with a straight face that in the end it all was better for him to have had to wait thirty-eight years to be healed.

But the good news of missed windows is that even the longest, saddest story, in Christ’s hands, can be used to lift up true healing. And that’s what this was: true healing, and it put on notice the cheap knock offs that leaned on rulebooks or random bubbles in pools.

Healing, true healing, has that ability: to cast a light on just how short anything else falls.

For centuries, the affliction of Hansen’s disease, commonly known as leprosy, struck fear in many a heart. It was believed that the disease caused the decay of flesh, the loss of appendages, and if you touched someone with this disease, you too would get it. And so those with Hansen’s disease were cast out, and usually the most they could expect was to eke out a life cut off from family and friends. Maybe people came to give alms and scraps, or in some cases maybe they even received a degree of care, but not cure, not treatment, and for a long time, it was thought that was the best that could be done, the best they could hope for.

But in the 20th century, building on the research of other doctors and scientists, a British physician named Paul Brand, while serving in India, proved that the disease itself was not so contagious as originally thought, and additionally, that the disease itself caused nerve damage, not flesh decay. The nerve-loss lessened the ability to feel pain, which meant that someone with the disease could burn their hand or break a foot, only to go about their business without tending to the injury, causing permanent damage and disfigurement later. He developed methods to reconstruct the muscles and tendons in the hand to restore some use if they had been badly damaged.

But perhaps more than any of that, there is story after story of Dr. Brand encountering a new patient, followed by the patient breaking down into tears, not because of the diagnosis, not because of there was a change of restored dexterity, but because Dr. Brand had touched them, had made contact with them, when for years they had been cast out. What Dr. Brand was going

for was true healing, and in so doing cast a light on the cruelty and insufficiencies of what had come before.

Friends, today you might be suffering. It might be physical like this man by the pool in Jerusalem, or could be spiritual or mental or emotional. You might have been suffering for a long time, and you might have felt that you missed your window to be made well a long time ago. You might regret it. You might be bitter because of it. You might ask yourself, why has this had to last so long? And I can't say I'd blame you for it.

But if the Jesus's healing of this man is a sign of anything, it shows that even the longest, saddest story, in Christ's hands, can still lead to true healing, to true wholeness, and that it's not too late to believe and have life.

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