



## SUNDAY SERMON

# House of Mercy

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### DATE

Easter 6  
Sunday, May 26, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

If you've never seen the Bethesda Fountain, in Central Park, in New York City, you should put it on your to-do list for the next time you're in New York. It's just a fountain with a statue, surrounded by a terrace — the sort of thing we have a lot of here in Washington. But this fountain—this terrace—it's hard to describe how beautiful and moving it is, especially if you know a bit about why the fountain is there.

Bethesda fountain lies at the end of a long walkway that runs through the park. The walkway descends into a wide tunnel that cuts under 72<sup>nd</sup> street. The tunnel is dark but its walls and ceiling are covered in beautiful, Italianate tile-work. And when you emerge into the light on the other side, the terrace spreads out before you, formal red brick surrounding a large peaceful pool, and in the center of the pool is a monumental bronze statue of an angel. The fountain commemorates the bringing of fresh water into the city in 1842, water that meant healing and life and a future for the city.

Bethesda fountain is the setting for the final scene of "Angels in America," Tony Kushner's epic play about the beginning of the AIDS crisis. In the scene, Prior, the main character who is living with and surviving with AIDS, says that Bethesda fountain is his favorite place in New York, maybe even in the whole universe. Then he explains who the Angel is, and gets his friends to tell the audience about her. This is what they say:

PRIOR: This is the angel Bethesda. Louis will tell you her story.

LOUIS: Oh. Um, well, she was this angel, she landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem, in the days of the Second Temple, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched the earth. And where it did, a fountain shot up from the ground. When the Romans destroyed the Temple, the fountain of Bethesda ran dry.

PRIOR: And Belize will tell you about the nature of the fountain, before its flowing stopped.

BELIZE: If anyone who was suffering, in the body or the spirit, walked through the waters of the fountain of Bethesda, they would be healed, washed clean of pain. ----

I like Louis' fantastic version with the fountain shooting up from the ground wherever the angel would land, but that isn't exactly how it's described in the Gospel. Bethesda, you see, is the same pool we just heard about in the Gospel of John—Beth-zatha, as John calls it, is just a different translation of the same name.

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Now unfortunately, newer versions of the Bible omit a verse from this passage, because it looks like it was added later on, not original to John's Gospel. But the verse they omit is the most colorful one—I remember this story vividly from the King James Version of my childhood. Here's the passage with the missing verse restored:

"Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed, waiting for the stirring of the water; \* for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well from whatever disease that person had."

You can see why Tony Kushner chose this setting to end his play about AIDS. The angel of Bethesda is a symbol of all God's healing power, of God's yearning to bring healing and wholeness to the world. The collect today assures us that God wants such good things for us that surpass our understanding and "exceed all that we can desire." God wants every sickness to be mended and every rift to be healed, from the smallest, most personal issue all the way up to the healing of the nations.

God wants this healing—but the question is, do we want it? At least, that's the question Jesus asks the sick man he encounters at the pool. "Do you want to be made well?" It's a fair question. John tells us that Jesus knew this man had been sick a long time. Thirty-eight years is a very long time to keep trying, but not quite making it, into the pool.

What do you think was holding this man back? I don't mean to underplay whatever real disability he was struggling with. But you have to wonder—could he have asked somebody for help, in all those years? Did he? Maybe his illness also affected the way he presented himself to the world. Maybe it made him ashamed, too embarrassed to ask for help.

Maybe he started to believe that he didn't really deserve to be healed. Maybe he got comfortable with the way things were.

Or — maybe it's the people around this sick man who got comfortable with the way things were. He says that the reason he's been waiting thirty-eight years is that, in all that time, there's been no one to help him into the water. People passed him by every day but somehow couldn't see this need right in front of them.

John is keen to point out, at the end of the reading, that Jesus heals this man on the Sabbath, the mandatory day of rest. Keeping Sabbath was a sacred duty, and work of any kind was forbidden. Well, the religious authorities considered healing work — so when they find out they condemn Jesus for healing this man on the Sabbath.

How easy it is to allow tradition to become a trap where rules count more than people do. But Jesus doesn't care about the letter of the law: he knows that God intends the Sabbath to be a day of rest and restoration for all people. God intends the Sabbath for us, not the other way around. Jesus fulfills the spirit of the law when he helps this man, raising him into health and wholeness.

Do you want to be healed? Jesus is asking us the same question. Part of Jesus' healing power is just: paying attention. Seeing us. Listening to us. Whatever sickness you have, in your body — or somewhere deeper, in your mind or your heart, Jesus sees, and knows, and is right there with you, surrounding you and holding you up.

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It's easy to feel inadequate, a little broken, when we look out and compare ourselves to others: to feel not quite smart enough, or attractive enough, or rich enough. Especially in this town. If you ever have nights when you stay up thinking these kinds of thoughts—and I know I do—that is the moment when I want you to hear Jesus saying to you: "Friend—stand up. Take up your mat, and walk." This might sound harsh at first: stop whining and get on with it. But behind that, what Jesus is really saying is: I believe in you. I know you are worthy. I will give you the strength to do this. Just believe that you can, and you will.

And just as God has healed us, God is calling us to build a world where healing is possible, where everyone has enough of the abundance we share to live a happy and whole life. The gift that Jesus offers the sick man in the Gospel story is the same gift that he offers us: the gift of seeing us. Of paying attention.

And this gift is in our hands now, and it's not a miracle cure: God is calling us to open our eyes, see where the need is in the world around us, and to share this gift with others.

In Aramaic the word Beth-ḥesda literally means "House of Mercy"; and in Hebrew, "Beit-ḥesed" means "House of Kindness." What would it mean for St. Columba's to become a house of kindness for this city? And what would it mean for Washington to become a house of mercy for the world? A place where we're always striving to make the world a better place, for all its inhabitants? This is the work that St. Columba's is called to do. And yes, I believe this is the work that even Washington is being called to.

Now is the time—the water is stirring. The Angel is here. Jesus needs us to jump in and get our feet wet. The last line of Angels in America: The Great Work Begins.

Amen.