

Whatever It Takes to Be Whole
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Sometimes you just have to be there. Sometimes you just have to be there to get it. I mean really “get it”. And, by some quirk of the preaching and lectionary schedules, my husband, Daniel, and I have been to two of the places mentioned in today’s readings. (Frankly, I’m not sorry that we haven’t been to the places mentioned in all the readings since the second reading describes a heavenly scene before the throne of God!)

But we have visited the current site of the Roman colony of Philippi and last month we were in Jerusalem. I tell you that, not to boast about our travels, but because in both cases, as I said in the beginning, “Sometimes you just have to be there to get it.” So, I invite you to follow me back in the readings with the added eye of a tourist!

The story in the Acts of the Apostles picks up on an old friend from a couple of weeks ago: Saul of Taurus. You remember, he is the Pharisee who set out to find followers of Jesus in Damascus. But a different man walks into Philippi in today’s reading. The scapegoat Saul is now Paul, a follower of Jesus. He walks into Philippi in response to a vision asking for him “to proclaim the good news” there.

Some twenty years ago, Daniel and I walked into Philippi. What was left of the Roman colony were hundreds of large marble blocks and pillars randomly scattered on the ground. Yet, it was easy to imagine the vast size and wealth of the town in Paul’s time - if a giant hand could arrange the columns, pedestals and beams into courtyard, porticoes and rooms! But, from the story, the size and wealth of town is not what attracts Paul. Whatever sense of power and authority, of making things happen appears to have shifted in him.

Instead of seeking others to attack in Damascus, Paul’s attention now is on finding a place of prayer. According to the story, “On the sabbath day, we went outside the gate by the river...”. Having been there, I can tell you it’s quite a distance from the hustle and action of the city to the quiet banks of the river. From the end of the marble ruins to the river is not a casual decision or short jaunt. Paul’s decision doesn’t seem to fit into the heart of Saul heading to Damascus. Clearly, Paul’s eyes are now seeking different things, places and people. He is looking outside of the usual places of power. He is drawn to alternative ways of relating to people. Paul is hungry for a deeper experience, one by flowing water, being around hearts open to the Holy.

Even more amazingly, what Paul does reveals his transformation. Remember the story: “...and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.” Those words would never have described a Pharisee or male Jew of that time - except those whose minds and hearts have been changed by Jesus. Part of the radical nature of Jesus’ message and life is the stripping away of unnecessary and hurtful cultural divisions - male/female, Jew/Greek. Who knows how this early encounter between Paul and these women may have seeded Paul’s central focus on the

removal of divisions? In any case, Lydia trusted him enough to urge him to stay in her home. What a long distance Paul has travelled.

The place in our gospel reading is Jerusalem and the story is a familiar one. It's one of Jesus' healings. "Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate, there was a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zeth, which has 5 portfolios. In these lay many invalids - blind, lame and paralyzed." Jesus goes there.

In an exchange between Jesus and a lame man, the man tells Jesus that he has no one to place him in the pool "when the water is stirred up." Hmmmm...." when the water is stirred up." Ever wonder what that's about? I have and last month the mystery was solved - or at least one explanation.

Daniel and I are standing outside the ruins of the ancient walls of Jerusalem with our Jewish tour guide. She is pointing out a large pool, empty of any water. "Remember the story about Jesus' healing the lame man outside the pool at the Sheep Gate?", she asks. (She was always quizzing us on our Christian texts.) "Ever wonder how the water was stirred up? Come with me." We nodded and eagerly trailed behind her.... until we realized that getting an answer entailed a steep descend into a long, narrow stone passageway. It was an excavated section of King Herod's elaborate water system supporting his extravagant lifestyle. Of course, now dry - well, mostly.....

At the end of the 10 minute-trek (not for those with claustrophobia), we arrived at a very large cavernous room: the cistern where the water was stored. She pointed out a smaller opening near the top. It was to accommodate excess water, a condition which occasionally, though rarely, happened in arid Israel. But when the source of life reached the top and wasn't need by the rich and wealthy, the extra water spilled over into a pool outside the walls. The blind, lame and paralyzed are waiting there for castoffs from the elite. Not surprising, they believed that healing could only happen when the rich favored them, noticed them. It is to that place that Jesus comes and confronts this false and hurtful lie. "Do you want to be made well?" But he has no response to the man's explanation of how the unjust system doesn't work for him.

Brushing it off, Jesus invites the man into the truth: "Stand up, take your mat and walk." And our ears hear: I am the living water. Drink from me and you will never be thirsty again."

Sometimes you just have to be there to get it. And we all are there. We are Paul, invited to see with the eyes of Jesus. We hunger for time apart from town, to pray, to find the holy in ourselves and in others. We are all blind in some way and can't see beyond our own ego. We are the lame man. We are caught up in repeating unhealthy behavior in hopes that the next time it will make us whole. We are all lame in some way.

And Jesus comes, somehow, someway. Jesus finds us when we are vulnerable, open to be changed. We just need to get there to get it. And sometimes that means we need to travel to a spiritual place we haven't been before and feel like a tourist. Amen.