



# Imagination: Seeing God

*TEXT*  
*John 5:2-9*

May 3, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

**N**ow in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids — blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “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.” 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. Now that day was a sabbath.

Thirty eight years. That’s how long the man has been lying there by the pool. This particular pool, Bethzatha or Bethsaida or Bethesda, has five porticoes or archways. Picture this. In those archways are any number of blind and lame and paralyzed and sick. They are there because the tradition says that every once in a great while, an angel will come and stir up the waters, and when that happens, the first people

who make it into the water will be healed.

Jesus goes to the man and asks him a peculiar question. “Do you want to be made well?” “Do you want to be healed?” At face value, you have got to be surprised. Excuse me, Jesus, but you know he has been here for 38 years and that is the question you ask him? I mean, what is he going to say? “No, Jesus, I’ve been lying here for 38 years because I’m searching for the perfect tan.” Of course he wants to be made well.

But remember the man’s response to Jesus. Instead of answering the question, he says, “Well, there’s no one here to help me when the water moves, and when I try to get to the water, someone else gets in front of me.” He explains why he has been there so long. Some say he makes excuses.

One friend of mine, New Testament scholar Beth Johnson, says she thinks Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” because Jesus knows, in his heart of hearts, this man does not want to be made well. After all this time, it’s just easier, it’s just safer, to be ill. It is too risky to be healthy. I think she is on to something. I also think for whatever reason, this man has

lost his ability to imagine what it would like to be healthy, to be whole. He has lost his gift of imagination.

Sometimes that happens to us — especially as we get older and more sophisticated, more seemingly self-reliant. We become skeptics of mystery, wary about wonder, and doubters of awe. We lose our imagination.

Last week I preached about the power of resilience; that in challenging times, resilient people stick with what is most important and do not get distracted. They stay with what matters. They keep the central things central.

There is also power in this God-given gift of imagination. Imagination is understood to be the power, the ability to see and envision through and even beyond that which is before us. Imagination is the ability to transcend the concrete, the tangible, and to think of new possibilities and promises both in our past, now in our present, and in our future. Neuroscientists say engaging one’s imagination is more a journey inward than outward. It is an act of reflecting on what has been and what is now, outside and around us, and taking it all in to ponder, to reflect upon, to see deeply both the past and pres-

ent, then to dream and envision a new way of being. Whenever I hear our senior pastor Tom Are preach about living toward God's promised day ... all of that is an act of imagination.

One of the reasons I am so grateful for you who are adolescents is over and over, you have shown me what it means to engage our imagination. Years ago, I was meeting with a group of young people and adults who were planning a national youth conference called the Presbyterian Youth Triennium. We met at different places all over the country, and this particular meeting was in New York City. We stayed in a United Methodist guest house in Greenwich Village.

When our work was over, we stayed over one extra day to tour New York together, just to spend a good day being with one another. One of our team members was a high school senior named Kirk. He was a member of a small church outside of Bozeman. He and his family were ranchers. Kirk was a big country guy. He was 6'5" tall and easily 250 pounds. He was funny and kindhearted. When I met him and a bunch of the other youth and adults at LaGuardia Airport, it was easy to pick him out. He was wearing this white cowboy hat, western style shirt and jeans and cowboy boots. Kirk confided in me that this was his first time to New York. In fact, he had never been anyplace like this, a city this large, this diverse, this crowded.

On our sightseeing day, as we were leaving the guesthouse, Kirk said he would like to stick

with me because he was a little scared because he had heard that New York was a rough place. I thought to myself, "Kirk, you are a 250-pound, 6'5" white boy from Bozeman, Montana. I think these people have more reason to be scared of you than you have to be scared of them."

I knew Kirk wasn't quite in his element when we were walking to the subway to go to the Statue of Liberty, and I realized he was waving at cars as they were going by. I asked him, "Kirk, what are you doing?"

He told me, "Well you know, Rodger, back home, folks warned me that New York City people aren't friendly. But it's just like being back home. At home, when you want to say 'hey' to someone, you just honk. Here, everyone is saying 'hey.' That's right nice."

I said, "Kirk, they're not saying 'hey,' they're saying 'get out of the way.'"

Toward the end of the day — we are American consumers after all — the group wanted to go shopping at Bloomingdale's, so we headed up there. I didn't need to go shopping, so I said I would wait for the group with anyone else; so several of us, including Kirk, stood outside the store on Lexington Avenue and waited and watched people. Lexington Avenue is six lanes of traffic all heading downtown.

We were about mid-block and several of us noticed an older adult woman with a walker who started to make her way across. She was moving deliberately but slowly, and it soon became clear that she was not going to even get

halfway across the avenue before the light turned. Before any of us could do anything, a New York City sanitation worker who was emptying garbage cans on the other side of the street ran out and got between her and the line of cars, held his hands up to stop the traffic and guided her safely across. She patted his hand and kept going down the block.

Kirk had been watching all of this and, as the worker was waiting to go back across the street, Kirk yelled out, "Hey, sir! Sir!" The sanitation worker looked around and realized Kirk was yelling at him. When Kirk saw that he had his attention, he yelled, "I saw what you did! Man, you rock. You're the best!" And Kirk started cheering. Then he got the rest of us cheering. Then other people on the street who had also seen what the man had done, they started cheering. And then to our delight, the handsome man in the orange sanitation suit bowed back to us. Then he ran across the street and waved at us, and he got back into his truck to empty more trash cans. As he was driving away, he honked, and Kirk looked at me and I said, "Okay. Now you can wave."

That night, we were sharing our last evening prayers and reflections. When it came to Kirk's turn, he said he was going to tell his church in Montana that he saw God in, of all places, New York City. Kirk said, "I'm telling them that God is a big African American guy in an orange jumpsuit helping old ladies cross Lexington Avenue." Kirk used his imagination to see God.

God has gifted us with imagination — the ability to take in what has been and what is now and to see, really see, how God is at work among us, even through us, sometimes in spite of us.

Thirty-eight years he sat by the pool ... waiting by a still pool. And in one moment, he was healed. His whole world changed. By the grace of God in Jesus, he woke up. He was ready — ready for different waters, waters that were overflowing. Friends, let's imagine. Let's wake up. Let's be ready to imagine. Let's be ready.

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

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.