

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
May 22, 2022
Acts 16:9-15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5
John 5:1-9

Think Again, Imagine Anew

I love the questions in scripture. There are a great many of them, and they can encapsulate so much. We can hear one of these questions and suddenly the whole story comes back to us.

In a certain way, these questions can create spaces of imagination for us, even contemplative spaces. Do you know what I mean?

God's question to Adam and Eve: "Where are you?"

God's question to Cain: "Where is your brother?"

And Cain's question back to God: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

God's questions to Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" [and "Have you ever in your days commanded the morning light?"]

God's question to Elijah: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

God's questions to Jonah, including: "What right do you have to be angry?"

The lawyer's question to Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" followed quickly by "Who is my neighbor?"

The religious leaders' question to Jesus, including: "By what authority do you do these things?"

The woman of Samaria's question to Jesus at the well: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?"

And then there are all the questions that Jesus asks. Depending on what translation you use and how you count, you'll find Jesus asks upwards of 130 questions in the four canonical gospels.

Questions to lots of different people, starting early at age 12 to his parents who were so fretful about what had happened to him. They go back to the temple in Jerusalem and he asks, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I had to be about my Father’s business?”

He starts early, and he doesn’t stop. All the way through, he asks things like...

[To the woman of Samaria at the well: “Will you give me a drink?”]

To the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount: “Why are you anxious?”

[To the disciples in the midst of a storm: “Why are you terrified?”]

To the disciples before a crowd of 5,000+: “How many loaves do you have?”

To the disciples after washing their feet: “Do you know what I have done to you?”

[To the critics of the woman anointing his feet in Bethany: “Why are you bothering this woman?”]

[To the demons plaguing the man in Gerasa: “What is your name?”]

[To the crowd when the woman with a hemorrhage grabbed his cloak: “Who touched me?”]

[To a blind man after putting mud on his eyes: “Can you see anything?”]

[To Mary and Martha of Bethany after Lazarus dies: “Where have you laid him?”]

[To the police of the high priest: “If I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?”]

He asks a lot of people a lot of questions, more than 130 more besides the ones I have just recited.

[To various people in various encounters: “What do you want me to do for you?”
“What do you want?”]

[Some of these questions are rhetorical; some are actual requests for responses.]

And then, there’s his question in today’s gospel. A question to a man lying in a portico near the pool of Bethesda, an important public mikveh or ritual bath in

Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate. A question to a man who has been sick for a very long time.

The question is, “Do you want to be made well?”

This question doesn’t seem to be a rhetorical one. Jesus is asking the man about what he truly desires.

“Do you want to be made well?”

The man responds, but he doesn’t actually answer the question, does he?

Instead, he launches into an account of how he has been trying to be the first one to get into the pool of Bethesda when the waters are stirred because the first person in is always healed of their ailment.

He has been ill for 38 years. We don’t know if he’s been hanging out near the pool of Bethesda for all those years trying to be the first one in when the waters are stirred. But we do know he’s been there a long time and has been unsuccessful. Someone else always gets there first. He says it’s because he doesn’t have anyone to help him.

I have some questions about his answer.

Why is this his answer? Is it a well-practiced, oft-recounted tale of woe? Is it his usual schtick; does he offer it up as an excuse for why he can’t accomplish his mission? Does he run through this sad history regularly to solicit alms from passersby on their way to the ritual baths?

Jesus the Christ is standing in front of him asking him if he wants to be made well. All he has to say is yes or no. There will be required actions if he says yes. But it starts with yes or no.

Do you want to be made well?

Maybe this is the first time anyone has ever asked him if he wants to be made well. Maybe it’s the first time anyone has asked him about his life or himself.

Maybe he doesn’t know what he wants. His life has been oriented around his illness for nearly forty years at least. His sole focus has been wishing to get into the pool first. This is the only path to healing he has been able to conceive, to imagine. He

knows that others have been successful in using this approach. And it's the one he is betting everything on. He is in a fixed mindset concerning how his healing will come, if it ever does.

Jesus has the power to make him well in that moment. His dreams can come true. His health can be restored. Something even better than jumping the line is on offer to him. But he can't imagine it, can he? His imagination has run dry.

Jesus doesn't wait until he gives an actual answer or the right answer. Jesus accepts what he is able to offer from within his stuck approach and gives him a new approach.

Stand up, take your mat and walk.

Has he had the capacity to do this all these years and not known it? Has he underestimated himself and the strength of his body all this time?

How many times have I, have you been stuck and didn't know it? How many times have I, have you been fixated on a goal that somehow was decided as a long-term and far off one when it was actually already within our grasp?

The man is not required to sign a contract, recite a creed, undergo any initiation or hazing, or be approved by any religious or governmental body. All he has to do is act on Jesus' instructions. John says upon Jesus' giving of those instructions, the man is made well. And he does what Jesus says: he stands up, takes his mat and walks.

His life is transformed. How? He is mobile. He is no longer an invalid. Rather, he is validated as a person. His life can be about something else now, about walking in health rather than lamenting a lack of health and a lack of help.

For 38 years he thought the most direct way of obtaining healing was getting into a pool several yards from where he lay.

In an instant, he learns there's a much more direct way. To his credit, he accepts it. He stands up and walks. He could have refused. Jesus doesn't make him do it. But Jesus offers it to him, makes the way crystal clear.

Imagine this man's courage. To let go in an instant a plan he has lived on and lived by for 38 years. On the strength of a word from this passing rabbi.

In the first reading from Acts, Paul receives a request for help from someone in a vision. A man calling out in words Paul can understand pleads, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul is willing to act on this message. He has seen enough and lived through enough now not to be surprised when messages come to him in dreams or bright lights or heavenly voices. He's been asked to do a lot of strange things; he has done them; and God has been faithful. And so, he's willing to act on this vision.

In the verses of Acts just before our reading today, we learn that Paul and his companions, including Timothy, had repeatedly thought they should enter one of the regions of Asia. Each time they an idea about Asia and how to get there, the Spirit prevented them one way or another. Acts says, "The spirit of Jesus hindered us." "The Holy Spirit would not allow us" to enter this place or that place.

Entering Asia was their idea. Going to Macedonia, the territory north of Greece and a Roman colony was the Holy Spirit's idea; and it was given to them in a dream, a vision in the night.

Acts says Paul and his companions immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia. But there was no direct flight, and there was no direct shipping route. So, they traveled with purpose and intention, clear on their mission, but their route was circuitous. They started in Troas, where they received the message; they had to go to Samothrace, then Neapolis, and at last to Philippi, a prominent city in Macedonia.

And when they got to Macedonia and into the city of Phillipi, they were looking:
Who was that who appeared and asked us to come and help?

Can you imagine Paul, like, *I'll know him when I see him. Right? I saw him very clearly in my dream. I'll know him when I see him. We'll just have to wait and be patient.* So, they cased the joint, and they hang out for some days. And then it's coming on the sabbath, and they imagine that there will be a group of Jews praying together near a body of water if there's no synagogue. And, sure enough, they go down to the riverside and there is a prayer meeting. They went to a prayer meeting with a bunch of women.

Imagine if Paul had been insistent: *I have to find the man who appeared in my vision.* He encountered a group of women and among them a woman named Lydia, a follower of God, a wealthy woman, a merchant woman, a dealer in purple dye. She becomes the first Christian pastor in Europe.

It was Europe first not Asia first. The Spirit led them a different way, and if they

hadn't recognized Lydia, her gifts and graces, and if she hadn't received them, we might not be here today. The first Christian pastor in Europe: not the man in the vision but a woman called Lydia.

The Jesus movement expanded into another continent on the strength of a dream and the willingness of Paul and his companions to follow the Spirit a different way and not be so hung up on their plan. They followed the Spirit; they trusted their gut., even when their hearts and minds had been fixed on Asia.

Sometimes we think things can only go one way, the way we already decided, the way we already figured out. We think we know the most expeditious and direct path. We might just have to work and work and work at it, but eventually, we'll get there. And then another way is disclosed to us. Sometimes it's so drastically different from what we expected and with a result even better than we had imagined, like today's collect say, it almost seems like magic.

Other times we have the seed of an idea, a vision, an internal knowing. We've never heard of it before, but it comes to captivate our attention. We take steps toward it. even though the way is not straightforward. The path is circuitous. But at last we get there, and something previously unimaginable begins.

In both these amazing stories today, we find models for doing things differently, for thinking again, as Adam Grant says, for reimagining. These are two more examples in scripture of how a growth mindset is more fruitful than a fixed mindset.

In both the case of the man near the pool of Bethesda acting on Jesus' instructions and the case of Paul and his companions acting on the Spirit's prompting in a vision, we see missions accomplished by new methods. Healing was possible without getting in the pool. Extending the Jesus movement to a new continent was possible in Europe at that time rather than Asia.

Isn't this just like God, who is constantly inviting us to think again, to imagine anew, to try something different. What is God nudging you to think about differently, to do differently, to imagine anew? Will you act on what the Spirit is whispering to you?