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 Fifth Sunday of Lent

Facing Change: Illness, Aging, and More
John 5:2-9

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew^[a] Beth-zatha,^[b] which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.^[c] ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ 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?” ⁷ 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.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

We’ve all heard it: the ***only thing in life that doesn’t change, is CHANGE.***
 We all have to deal with it, don't we?

I only know a few people who ***thrive*** on change, what about you?
 I like to do new things and make new plans and visions,
 but there are things I just don't want to change.
 Like my breakfast smoothie,
 or what I order at a favorite restaurant.
Most of us do NOT want to change too much in our lives—right?

The fear of change is real, and universal.
 And that fear can ***paralyze*** us.
 It can keep us doing the ***same old thing, over and over again....***
 (which is the definition of ***insanity!***)

The fear of change can ***keep us from hearing from God, or following Jesus***

Why is change so scary?
 Maybe it’s because it’s so ***unknown.***
 It’s ***not the familiar, comfortable situation*** we know.

Believe it or not, people in horrible, even abusive situations, often do not leave,
 because ***the abuse they know is better than a future they don't know!***

Have you ever stayed in a bad situation or circumstance,

because it was comfortable and familiar?

Have you ever been ***afraid to change?***

I have.

It's ***hard*** to change,

and when we are forced to change, we usually have ***grief to deal with,***
over losing what was familiar.

But it's ***also hard to NOT change.***

It can cause us to become ***bitter, stuck, resistant to what God has in store for us!***

The Good News is that change ***can be transformative—***

God can use it to move us forward.

How do YOU respond to change?

Fight? Flight?

Do you Ignore it?

Or double down in having it your way?

Do you have a meltdown?

Some of the biggest changes that we face are ***changing family situations***

(whether we are raising ***kids in a new phase*** every few years)

or ***caring for parents*** growing older,

And then there are ***job changes, new financial situations....***

But I think some of ***our biggest fears---***

Are the fears of ***growing older, or losing our health,***

whether that be ***physical or mental*** health.

Do you fear any of that?

Aging can be scary—and it's happening to ***ALL*** of us, right?

What are your biggest fears about aging?

In Adam Hamilton's book *Unafraid*, he talks about ***older adults being happier!***

He refers to studies—one by a Harvard researcher,

who started in 1939 to track 280 men for 75 years,

to ***study happiness and aging.***

And you know what they discovered?

The key to happiness in old age came down to ***one word: LOVE.***

Especially love of God, and others.

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 180-1.

Maybe Jesus really was on to something with that ***Great Commandment***, huh?

Other research suggests that ***older adults, especially 70+, are much happier than younger adults***,
you know ***why?***

More ***realistic expectations*** of life.

More ***gratitude and appreciation*** for what they have.

More time to spend with ***family, friends, hobbies, leisure***.

They feel ***less pressure to please*** everyone,

And are ***less overwhelmed by hardship***—because of all their life-experience!

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 181.

We see this truth, in the Bible.

Some of the most important people in scripture ***were over 70 years old***,
when God called them to ***a new mission, a new place, or a new family!***

Abraham and Sarah—with a baby on the way!

Moses was older when God called him from the burning bush,

and even older as he led the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness!

Joshua was no spring chicken when he led the people into the Promised Land,
neither was ***Noah*** when the flood came,

or ***Elijah*** when he passed the mantle to Elisha.

Hamilton says in his book that he believes that ***God often uses seniors to do the greatest work, and this often happens past retirement age!***

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 185.

I agree with that---do you?

In fact, there is ***no 'retirement' per se*** in the Bible---

not from serving God or responding to God's call!

If we are able to do the task,

God doesn't care how old we are!

You know the other reasons that aging doesn't have to be scary?

Wisdom and Fulfillment.

Getting older often brings the ability to do new ***fulfilling*** things,

And it gives the ***life experience***, which can bring great wisdom.

Do you remember ***Simeon and Anna***,

the two prophets who met Joseph and Mary in the temple,

when they brought the baby Jesus to be dedicated to God?
 They were seniors who spent all their time in the Temple,
praying and worshipping, and waiting to see the Messiah.
 And finally, they *did just that!*
 Their lives had such *meaning, and purpose,*
Because they had that fulfillment and wisdom!

Is there something about aging that you used to believe,
 That you now know is *NOT true?*
 Hamilton writes about the facts---
 that many people as they *age get happier,*
 and a majority of people's fears of terminal illness, or Alzheimers, or dementia
does not "automatically happen" after a certain age!

Unfortunately, the *media knows* our universal fear of illness—
 and they *capitalize* on our fears!

Did you know that Nielson says there are approximately
80 drug commercials on T.V., *PER HOUR?*
 We've all seen these commercials---what do you notice? What do you see?
 And hey, what about those *side effects* they list?
 Kind of makes you think you don't need any medication for your ailment!
 Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 192

Basically the whole commercial plays on our *fears of illness,*
 and the *lie that we can control it*—by just 'talking to our doctor'
 about whatever latest, greatest, medication!

In our Sunday school class we were complaining about these commercials,
 and then we discussed this:

What would a commercial for the drug called PRAYER look like?
 Think about the *promises, the visuals, the side effects* of that!

Wouldn't we see pictures of *health—physical and mental?*
 Wouldn't we see *every kind and age* of people portrayed?
 And the *side effects*—would be *great things,*
 like the peace of Christ,
 the love of God, the gifts of the Holy Spirit,
 and the presence of Jesus right beside you!
 Wow!

Now that's *a commercial we NEED to see, even 80 times an hour!*

You know, the man in John 5—had essentially *seen the commercials for healing*, because he'd *seen other people healed* by getting to the water first!

And then comes *Jesus—with a totally different approach—*

Do you *WANT* to be made well?

Did you notice—he does NOT SAY YES??? He complains, and explains...

And then Jesus just says, *take up your mat and walk!*

My guess is this man didn't just suffer physically, but also *emotionally and mentally, with anxiety*

Today *40 million people* in our country suffer with anxiety disorders, and the truth is that some kind of anxiety and worry *afflicts all of us* at some point in our lives, doesn't it?

Maybe it's facing you right now!

For some it becomes chronic.

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 194.

Hamilton talks about anxiety coming from *bringing the future into the present*.

And he has this great *definition* of worry:

Worry is imagining a negative future, that may never (and likely will never) happen.

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 194.

That's *true, isn't it?*

We can all get caught up in the negative *'what if' game*, can't we?

And you know where the *root* of all that is?

It's definitely *not God*.

Jesus says clearly in the Gospels time and again, *do not worry*.

In Matthew 6:34 he says explicitly, *stop worrying about tomorrow!*

Worry and anxiety comes from one place: *FEAR*.

And in 2 Timothy 1:7, Paul reminds us that

God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and love, and sound mind.

That's a powerful verse to memorize—

I have found myself reciting that one often lately.

In his book, *Unafraid*, Hamilton talks about the *anxiety struggles of his wife*, LaVon, and how she became overwhelmed with it at one point, when her physical health was suffering. She realized that some of her issue was *physical*, And *some was the anxiety* in her heart and mind.

She compares her struggle with anxiety to *weeds*, that keep *cropping up in a flower bed*.

She has to pay attention to it, to make sure she is not overcome with fear.

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 196.

You know *how she does it?*

She has some *tools to help her*:

admitting her struggle,

seeking counseling,

sometimes using medication and psychiatry,

pursuing her hobbies,

and then she talks about the incredible *power of God* in her struggle.

The power of *daily time with God, and the Bible, and serving others*.

She sees the miraculous power of *reaching out* to others, no matter how bad we are feeling.

For me, the biggest tools are daily, sometimes hourly, *prayer and meditation*, serving, and devotional reading, and listening, and when I can---hobbies like sewing or painting.

I also *meet with my Pastor*,

who is also a Spiritual director and therapist, at least once a month,

And I have found help from doctors with depression and anxiety, especially during this past year and a half of physical health problems.

Some say that relying upon these things are *signs of weakness*.

God actually says just the *opposite*—

Seeking help is a sign of strength, courage, facing our fears, and relying upon God.

Paul says this so well in 2 Corinthians 12:9-11:

But God said to me, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me... For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Makes *no sense to the world* out there,
but *perfect sense* to those who follow Jesus,
we, who *rely upon HIS power, not our own.*

What about you?

How do you struggle with *worry or anxiety*?

And what *tools* do you use from your faith, to help you?

God offers so many different tools, the question is—will we use them?

I am always available to you as your Pastor, to listen,
and help you explore so many different resources.

I used to wonder as a kid,

why do people older than me talk so much about sickness?

And now I realize—it’s because we all get older, and we all face
some kind of sickness—

and we *need support* from one another.

The Bible is very clear on this as well: *1 Corinthians 12:26-27* says:

If one member of the body suffers, all suffer, if one rejoices, all rejoice!

Now that’s the *kind of support we should offer one another---*

true empathy, compassion, and celebration!

Pastors *see a lot of illness and death.*

But Hamilton talks about how much of it *INSPIRES him,*

And I totally agree.

I am inspired by our brother in Christ, our Outreach Elder, Phil Lutz,
whose precarious health has not robbed him of his sense of humor,
or his faith. He told me last night, after learning that there is nothing left they can
do, that ***he has no fear***—he is going to be with Jesus.

In his book, Hamilton mentions a young man with ALS,
and his incredible ***courage, and tools*** for facing illness.

universally helpful tools, like:

Live ***one day*** at a time.

Admit your weakness.

Serve others.
Focus on God, family, and community.
Be grateful for something—every day.
 And of course, *pray*.

He mentions Allen, a pastor with terminal cancer,
 who can no longer work at a church,
 but now considers *the wards of the hospital his new mission field!*
 Allen says that his greatest peace come from prayer and meditation.
 In fact, he says that his *“entire existence is becoming an ongoing prayer”*.
 Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 206.
 I love that.

The truth is, *even when we are sick*---God can and does *use* us,
 God can and does bring us *peace, and comfort*,
 God can and does *help us* each and every day.
 And, having your entire existence become prayer—is a good thing!

What about us?

How do we handle our physical ailments?
 Do we *use the tools*, given to us by God, and Jesus—
 who though he was God, *also suffered in every way*, like we do?

When we hear this story of the man lying beside the pool,
 a man who had been lying there for 38 years—
 and we hear Jesus say: *Do you WANT to be made well?*
 The obvious answer is: *Yes!*

But in reality, it's *more complicated*, isn't it?
 He does not say Yes---because Yes means change!
 If he is healed, his life will *completely change!*
 He will no longer be lying with the other disabled people he has come to know,
 asking, begging for help every day, to get to the pool.

Jesus asks him this important question, *because change is SO hard*—
 even if it means *healing*, or *finding peace* in the midst of physical illness.
 Sometimes change means on *overhaul* on our life, which definitely isn't easy!

It's WAY EASIER to just complain and explain why we can't change, instead of
 answering when Jesus asks us: Do you WANT to be made well?

Do we want it?
Are we willing to change?

When my **brother** got sober 13 years ago,
he had to change his whole life.
He couldn't work in bars, as he'd done for many years.
Or hang out with his old friends,
He had to change all of his routines,
and turn to family for help.
It was a huge adjustment---but ***a life-giving transformation.***
He's an unbelievably successful businessman today,
Actually helping people in situations similar to what he faced!
His life change---helped him be able to change lives today!

What about us?
Do we want to stay the same, complain and explain, or do we want to change?
Change starts with us!
You know the old saying—Be the change you want to see in the world!

When we say ***Yes, I want to be well,*** it will mean ***change.***
Whether we are granted physical or mental healing—
We may have to change what we eat, drink, watch, listen to, or even social
activities.
And the people around us will change as well!
It's a ***great thing to be made well, but challenging too!***

And then, we all know this---
we do not always receive the physical or emotional healing we want or expect,
on this side of heaven.

Life is a mess.
Good people suffer—in all kinds of ways.

But if we say ***Yes, I want to be made well*** to Jesus---
We are guaranteed some kind of ***transformation!***
Because Jesus brings ***transformational, Life-giving, resurrection power!***

And, ***God has been doing*** transformation from the very beginning!
Just like Isaiah 43:19 says
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not see it?

*I will make a way in the wilderness
and streams in the desert*

Friends, *God IS doing a new thing.*
God wants to bring life-giving change—in and through us!
So, Will we *trust Jesus, enough to say Yes?*

Because you know what the *other constant* in life is, besides change?
It's our Savior---Jesus Christ.

And that is our *Good News of the Gospel* today!
Jesus is our rock, and our refuge.
our firm foundation.
our Healer.
And He is the one who *walks with us.....through any change.*

May we *take His hand, and let him lead us,*
And to that all God's people said, Amen.