

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

Today we have an extra special treat for the sermon.

Two of you have agreed to come forward and share with the congregation a little about your own faith and how Jesus called you to himself.

And so I would like to invite Lydia to come forward at this time.

Lydia? Is she here? Lydia? I think she might be hiding from me.

Please come on up. Well, since she does not seem willing to come forward, I will tell you what I can about this amazing woman.

Jesus came to Lydia through the words of Paul as she listened to him by the riverside. It was the Sabbath day. The Lord opened her heart and she believed. She and her household was baptized and from there on out she used her resources as a wealthy merchant to support God's work through Paul.

Since then Lydia has been very active at Good Shepherd.

She is the perfect Christian. She has helped teach Sunday School for the past 16 years never missing a week. She serves as a Stephen Minister, sings in the choir, serves on 6 other ministry teams, helps out at the NC Food Bank and everyone wants her to be their child's confirmation mentor.

Lydia is an inspiration to us all and she does it all with a smile on her face. Mother of the year.

Christian of the century. That's our Lydia.

Our second guest..... I am not seeing him either...also has an interesting story. Jesus came to him several years back at a low point in his life. Actually much of his life had been low. He was an invalid – blind, lame or paralyzed, I forget which – when Jesus approached him. He too was by water, the pool at the Sheep Gate. On that Sabbath, he was hoping to be the first in the water when the waters stirred up because local lore said the first in would be healed of his infirmities.

Well our friend is not too swift. You would think that in 38 years he might be first just once but no. Jesus comes up to him and asks him a curious question, “Do you want to be made well?” He doesn’t directly answer Jesus. He tries to explain for the 55<sup>th</sup> time why he can’t get down in the water first. And then Jesus just heals him. He just tells him to get up, get his mat and go. And he does it, a whole and well man. He only has one problem. He just can’t remember the name of the guy who heals him. He can’t until Jesus finds him later at the temple and tells him to go and sin no more. Then he declares that it is Jesus who has made him well.

We meet these two people in our lessons today.

Have you met them before? Do you know them?

Are they alike or different? It is hard to say.

Could either one of them be sitting beside you or two pews up and to your left? Perhaps. Or maybe one of them is you.

I listen to these two people’s stories, how Jesus has worked in their lives. And I don’t have to think long and hard to tell you which one of them I would like to be. I want to be Lydia.

Doesn’t she have a great story? Here she is

a successful business woman, selling expensive purple cloth.

Paul speaks. Jesus opens her heart to listen & hear & understand.

Bang! She is baptized and immediately offers her home to Paul and the others and generously serves God.

Man, she seems perfect. Her life looks like smooth-sailing to me.

She serves God. God blesses her. She is happy and faithful, for all we know, for the rest of her life.

That’s the kind of Christianity I want. No worries. No problems.

Now I doubt that was the case for Lydia

but with just this little snippet that we get from Acts you could be led to believe this caricature of real life.

I would really like to be Lydia but in reality I resemble the guy hanging out by the pool at the Sheep Gate a lot more.

I have been there 38 years, sitting on the edge of the pool wasting time. But I really don't have anything better to do.

I'm an invalid can't you see? I'm blind. I'm lame. I'm paralyzed or something. I-N-V-A-L-I-D INvalid inVALid

Someone told me along the way that there was something invalid, something just not right about me and I guess they were right.

I am blind to the good God has placed within me.

I've gotten wounded pretty badly along the way in life.

Now I have this lame leg that really slows me down.

Dragging it behind me is a constant reminder

of my sad and difficult past. At times, I am literally paralyzed by my fears. Afraid of what the future will hold.

Afraid that my past will only repeat itself.

With that kind of paralysis, how do you move forward?

There's another problem I have with all of this too.

I look out at all of you and think I see a sanctuary full of Lydias.

We all are not here putting on an act with a fake smile

and perfect lives. Of course not. But when you are the one

who is floundering, it is easy to think that everyone else here has got it together. You alone have doubts.

You alone feel blind or lame or paralyzed.

Everyone else just appears to be cruising through life.

Well, guess what? The idealized Lydia is a figment of our imagination.

At different points in our lives, you and I have played the part of Lydia and the guy at the pool. Sometimes Jesus opens our hearts

to listen to him and with his strength we respond in faithful and generous and amazing ways.

God's love and light shines through us and we know the joy of serving him. We feel valid,

true to who God has made us to be and alive.

But more often than not, all of us spend a lot more time at the pool by the Sheep's Gate with the other inVALids.

Not everything is right for us and we know it.

We try to hold on to hope. We keep our eyes glued to that water waiting for the first signs of it bubbling up so that we can beat everyone else in and be healed.

To those of us who came in through that Sheep Gate today and have sat down by this Baptismal pool of water,

Jesus comes and speaks. "Do you want to be made well?"

Do you know this Jesus who stands before you and has the power to make the blind see, the lame leap, the paralyzed to move?

Do you know that he has the power to change your name from inVALid to forgiven, loved, gifted, valuable child of God?

In fact, he has already done it.

On this Sabbath day, the Lord Jesus is here healing his people, making them whole in him. Jesus offers all of us rest, shalom, in him.

Jesus comes to us forgiving, loving, comforting, strengthening us for our new life in him. And then Jesus asks us to take part in his work of making all things new.

He asks us to follow him like Lydia opening our hearts to him and our lives to others that they too may see Jesus.

We do not live as invalids but valid / true followers of Christ.

And as such, we have a choice to make.

Will we be people that shine the light of Christ to those around us or will we be people that cast others in shadow?

Think about it. All of have experienced this before.

How many of you have walked into a classroom where the teacher, by their demeanor, put everyone in darkness and shadow?

And what a difference someone makes who places all those around him or her in the light of Christ.

Today the light and healing presence of Jesus has come to us.  
May we carry that light with us so that others can be validated  
by the love of Christ.