



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 13, 2019
2 KINGS 5:1-3, 7-15c; PSALM 111; 2 TIMOTHY 2:8-15; LUKE 17:11-19

TRANSFORMING LEPROSY

I had dinner with a friend on Friday night and she asked, “what have you been up to this week?” I answered, “I’ve been learning about leprosy.” She looked alarmed and pushed her chair back from the table so we were farther apart. I knew I better explain. I’ve been thinking about leprosy – what it was in the ancient world, how it impacted people’s lives – because both the Old Testament reading and the gospel hinge on miraculous healings of lepers. Naaman is cured by the prophet Elisha and ten lepers are made clean by Jesus.

Now before we imagine these people afflicted with what is known today as Hansen’s disease, we need to know that “leprosy” in the Bible doesn’t refer to that. It applies to a much broader category of skin diseases, most infectious, but some not, that can be painful and disfigure the skin. These diseases weren’t physically fatal, but the societal norms around them could be. Leprosy was considered a curse from God as punishment for sin. People with leprosy were viewed as

unclean, shunned by their neighbors, and pushed out of the community. That’s certainly the status of the ten men Jesus encounters on the way to Jerusalem.

But Naaman is a different story, and as it turns out, it’s one Jesus knew well. We know that because earlier in Luke’s gospel (4th chapter), when Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, and the crowd begins to question his authority, he replies, “there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha, and none were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” This enrages his listeners because Jesus is telling them that God’s grace and mercy isn’t exclusive to them – the righteous, hometown team – but extends to everyone. It seems that to Jesus, the story of Naaman is the story of how outsiders – even enemies – can be transformed by encountering the God of Israel, the One God.

And Naaman is completely transformed. I want to tell you the story again because some of the important details are outside the passage we heard today. Naaman is introduced as a commander of the King of Aram's army, who has crushed Israel and captured tremendous spoils of war, including children. His victories and wealth make him great in the eyes of others and a favorite of the king. The only problem is his skin disease, which doesn't seem to have diminished his social standing but does bring suffering. It is his source of "otherness," what shames and limits him.

Then the first miracle occurs. Despite her captivity by Naaman, a Hebrew girl shows him compassion, revealing that a prophet in her country knows a cure. So Naaman does what any politically shrewd, powerful man does. He tries to make a deal. He gets the king of Aram (the conqueror) to write a letter to the king of Israel (the conquered), commanding him to ensure Naaman's cure.

And he assembles a vast treasury of gold, silver and garments to bribe Elisha into working his magic. When the king of Israel gets the letter, he panics. He is certain the king of Aram is trying to pick a fight; and if that's the case, he's a dead man. That's what the tearing of the clothes is about.

So, news travels fast of the king's panic and Elisha offers to help. "Send him to me," he says. You can imagine the scene. The mighty Naaman, along with horses and chariots and piles of valuables, arrive at Elisha's house, expecting awe and a deferential welcome.

But Elisha (a vanquished, lesser, man to Naaman), doesn't greet him. In fact, he doesn't even come out. He sends a short message: go wash in the Jordan seven times.

And that makes Naaman furious. Here he has traveled a long distance into a foreign land, expecting a spectacular public miracle that confirms his importance despite his disease, and instead he gets abrupt instructions to go splash around in a shallow, muddy creek. Which is what the Jordan was compared to the rivers of Damascus. Naaman storms off in humiliation, with horses and chariots and gifts in tow.

But then the second miracle occurs. Naaman's servants have the courage to speak up, encouraging him to give the Jordan a try, and he *listens*. He immerses himself seven times in the water, and his flesh is restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he is clean. Imagine his astonishment at this third miracle, what it must feel like for the war-hardened, disfigured man to be returned to his original self, and the freedom and hope that brings. This healing makes so much possible, new ways of being and relationships, that lie far beyond the scope of his wealth and power.

So he returns to Elisha's house with all his company and stands before the prophet of Israel in deference and gratitude. "Now I know there is only One God," he says. "Please accept a present from your servant." Elisha refuses, saying he serves the living God, the healer, and that is enough for him. The story ends with Naaman requesting

permission to take two loads of earth back to Aram. He wants to worship the One God on holy ground.

This is the story of transformation Jesus knew well, and I imagine it has something to do with his surprise that only one of the ten men who are healed from their disease – the Samaritan, the foreigner – returns to give thanks. The lives of all ten are completely transformed, but only one connects it to God’s mercy and power.

It’s a lost opportunity, not only for them as individuals, but for the community. I wonder if Luke included the specific detail of ten men to remind his listeners of the importance of a faithful community. In the Jewish tradition, a quorum of 10 men is required for public prayer, called a *minyan*. The sages believe that among 10 faithful people, the divine presence dwells. The people don’t have to be rabbis or learned or even literate, but only if there are 10 can they read scripture together and offer important community prayers and blessings. Fewer than that, and they are limited to individual prayers. So ten men in one place is a symbol of holy community.

I wonder what happens next for Naaman and for the man who returns to Jesus. No matter what happens in their futures, they have real experience of profound healing. They know first-hand how the mysterious power of the Holy One can ease suffering and make way for new life. I imagine it strengthens them and gives them courage and resilience for when they encounter suffering and sadness

again. And they certainly will, because they are human. I imagine, too, that their experience reminds them and others that God’s mercy and grace extend to everyone, including the outsiders, the untouchables, and even those considered enemies.

I believe that’s true for us, too. Our experiences of loss and pain, when we hold them in the light of God’s ever-present love and in faithful community, can become places of transformation, compassion, and generosity. I have witnessed that in this community and in the lives of people here who share their stories of illness, grief, and disappointment. Their courage, resilience and kindness in the midst of hard times is deeply moving, and a source of strength and hope to me.

We are mourning the deaths of what feels like a lot of long-time members of Saint Mark’s these days, and I am grateful for the way this community names its grief and sadness and bears each other up. It is a testament to the faith of those who have gone before us and the holy community that persists still. May we also trust the One God whose grace and mercy transforms lives, generation after generation. Amen.

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c [Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."]



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