

Sermon for Proper 23C  
Sunday, October 9, 2022  
“Simple Faith”

Texts: Luke 17:11-19; 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s lectionary gives us two stories about lepers who sought healing. The Old Testament reading from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Kings involves Naaman, a commander of the Aramean king’s army who sought the Prophet Elisha to cure him of his leprosy, and in the Gospel reading, ten lepers who sought Jesus, one of whom turned around to thank him. Both of these stories are testaments to the power of God and are significant because the only requirement for healing was simple faith. You remember that in last week’s gospel lesson Jesus advised his disciples that if we had faith the size of a small mustard seed they could achieve tell a tree to jump into the sea. Today’s lessons are stories of encounters with the divine and examples of simple faith in action.

I’d like to begin by exploring the story of Naaman. Naaman was a leper. In modern medical terms, leprosy is a disease caused by bacteria known as *Mycobacterium leprae*. It causes sores on the skin, disfigurement of the limbs, facial changes, and nerve damage. It is treatable with antibiotics. Leprosy in the Bible referred to a variety of undistinguished skin conditions; perhaps Naaman had psoriasis that would have resulted in shiny, scaly patches on his skin; perhaps he had vitiligo, which would have looked like light patches against dark skin; perhaps he had some kind of widespread skin infection. Skin conditions like these are very common and appear contagious, even though they are not. The response by ancient society to anything that was abnormal or markedly different was marginalization and isolation or avoidance of the person from the community. Even worse, it was presumed when one had a disease that it was a punishment from God, which warranted being cast out of society so no ill fortune would befall everyone else. Such a response would have no doubt been very disturbing to Naaman, given his high social and military status. It was important to him to find some way to cure his leprosy and reclaim his inclusion in the community. Naaman had heard about Elisha, a great prophet and healer in Israel, and he sought Elisha’s help in curing his leprosy. Elisha’s cure was simple: “Go wash in the River Jordan seven times, your flesh shall be restored, and you will be clean.” But Naaman didn’t like that answer; he wanted Elisha to come to him and perform some elaborate ritual or at the very least, to wash in one of the great rivers of the region. We can be like Naaman sometimes, can’t we? In our consumerist society, we think something is better quality if it’s very expensive or is a certain brand or label. We’d rather buy clothes from Bloomingdale’s or Macy’s than K-mart or Target. (If we *do* buy them from Target, we certainly won’t tell our friends that’s where we got them!) We’d rather drive a Lexus than a Hyundai. We seem to prefer the elaborate over that which is simple. Naaman didn’t think doing something as simple as bathing in the Jordan River could cure him. I had always imagined that the Jordan River was a big river something like the mighty Mississippi, until I actually visited Israel. The Jordan River is little more than a stream or a creek in

many places. For political reasons, civilians are not permitted to go close to the actual river, so one must view it from afar. You can barely see it, it's so small! Naaman didn't think that something that tiny could be sufficient to cure him, but that's exactly what Elisha asked him to do. Elisha knew that all Naaman needed was the simple faith that he could be cured, and he would be. All Naaman needed was the courage to listen to the man of God and the faith that he would be healed...and he was!

The story from the Gospel lesson was similar. Ten lepers approached Jesus for healing. Instead of making elaborate gestures to invoke the power of God, he simply told them to show themselves to a priest. They listened to his command and were healed instantly. Their reason for going to the priest would have been for validation that they were ready to be reincorporated into their communities, since as lepers, they would have been cast out of their communities. But, only one, a Samaritan, returned to thank Jesus. He was a Samaritan, someone who was doubly outcast by Jewish society, first for being a leper and second for being a Samaritan. They had the simple faith that Jesus knew what he was talking about; they did as he asked, and they were healed.

It is easy for us to lose faith or doubt God's power, because we don't see him working in the ways we expect. We wonder why there is poverty, sickness, evil, or disaster in the world and why God doesn't come down in a great cloud with thunder and lightning to fix the problems of the world. We see devastation like we have seen in the last several weeks days with the effects of hurricanes that killed hundreds in Haiti and left countless of people homeless and in despair. Perhaps you're going through a rough period in our own life—loss of a loved one, broken relationships, addiction, loss of a job, poor health, dissatisfaction with where life's journey has brought us—and those things prevent us from seeing God at work in the little things. Perhaps your prayers seem to go unanswered.

But, we must look for the presence of God in all things and we must look for his movement in the midst of the chaos of life. The fact that we woke up this morning to one more day of life is, in itself, a blessing from God. We had clothes to put on to come here, even if they are old and tattered. We often fail to see God at work, because like Naaman, we are expecting him to act on a cosmic scale. We would rather see God working in a great and majestic way appropriate for the Creator of the Universe, but we forget that he *is* the Creator and is always at work. All we need to do is listen for his voice in the stillness, find him at work in the little things, have the simple faith that he is working, even when we can't see it. in unexpected ways. Just like Jesus met the Samaritans in the border region between Samaria and Galilee, God isn't afraid to meet us in the borderlands of our lives—those places where we find ourselves struggling and barely hanging on. He continues to bless us even in the messiness of our lives.

The other thing about this story is that it reminds us to thank God for his blessings, no matter how great or how small. God blesses us whether we deserve it or not. In fact, God blesses us far more than we deserve, and he knows that we can't ever

thank him to the degree that he blesses us. Even if we tried to thank him as much as he blesses us, we would never catch up, because he just keeps on giving. I'm reminded of a line from a song folks used to sing in the church I grew up in: "You can't beat God giving, no matter how hard you try." For starters, we'd be trying to compete with the ultimate giver, the one who gave us the immeasurable gift through Christ in his death and resurrection: the gift of salvation. When Jesus told the one leper, "Your faith has healed you." The biblical Greek text says "Your faith has *saved* you." Every blessing that we receive from God is *in addition* to salvation. We can't beat that, no matter how hard we try. All we need is simple faith, like the kind we heard about last week, faith the size of a mustard seed. Simple faith, like what Naaman and the Samaritan leper had. And then we need to recognize God moving in our lives and simply say, "Thank you, Lord." Amen.