

Past Sermons

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Reverend Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Salt Lake City
12 February 2006

Epiphany is a long season this year, which is giving us a nice, long time to explore the variety of epiphanies, the many ways in which the face of God appears to us, particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus.

So we have another story today, a brief vignette of Jesus, as he is approached by a leper with great faith in his ability to heal, and as he provides that healing.

That is our image, our glimpse of God for today: Jesus, harassed and busy as we saw him in the previous passage last Sunday, taking pity on the disgusting outcast, reaching out his hand, and making him whole. This image is amplified by the much longer story from Kings about the healing of Naaman the Syrian.

The stories together show us that God's will for us is healing and wholeness, that we are loved and our suffering is noticed, even if we are Syrians, even if we are outcasts.

The story of Naaman coming to the King of Israel reminds us of how often we look in the wrong places for healing. We expect everything to be made right by the people with all the power, the kings of our world ñ but they lack the ability, and often the will, to make us whole. If we look to the kings for healing, we will not find it. Healing, wholeness, restoration is found with the prophet, the man of God, the person who is truly connected to the heart of things.

The king is frightened because he knows he cannot heal Naaman and thinks his inability to do so may cause a war. His fear makes him forget what he knows of Elisha the prophet and what God has been doing through him. The king has all the temporal power, and the fear of the enmity that temporal power can attract. I imagine he was greatly relieved when Elisha came to the rescue.

To Elisha the situation was simple. This was an opportunity offered for all the world to observe God at work in Israel. It was not an occasion for Elisha's own glory or even for the benefit of Israel. It was for the world to see, 'that there is a prophet [a man of God] in Israel.' It is a divine Epiphany.

It is telling that Elisha does not make a big show of his healing. He does not slaughter whole herds of animals or gather great throngs of people or demand huge offerings. He simply sends a message that Naaman should wash seven times in the Jordan and thus become clean. He does not even meet the man. The sign is prepared. It is God who is

acting. All Naaman must do is follow instructions, perform the symbolic actions by which he accepts the healing offered to him.

Of course, Naaman had puffed up human ideas about what a worthy healing would look like. He expected something dramatic and rejected what Elisha offered. How fortunate that he had sensible servants to remind him that he surely would have done any difficult thing demanded by the prophet ñ so why not the simple thing? Remarkably, he put aside his pride, his sense of appropriateness and dignity, and did as he was told. He washed and was made clean.

This story of God's concern even for the disgusting, the outcast, the foreigner would echo in the minds of the Israelites of Jesus' time, whenever they saw lepers seeking healing.

Today leprosy is for us either a disease that exists only in old stories, or a disease for which one takes the proper medications and is healed. Over the past several decades leprosy has been eliminated from most countries and currently the number of lepers world wide has declined from millions to a few hundred thousand, all of whom can be treated with free medication.

But consider leprosy as it was for millennia. A dreadful disease, which caused terrible disfigurement and blindness. Because it was observed to be contagious, as well as just plain hideous to look at, lepers were excluded from society and even from family life. This exclusion still happens and is the major obstacle to total eradication.

Still a leper suffers pain and loneliness, a life without any of the comforts of home and companionship. All normal rules of compassion and hospitality are suspended because of the fear engendered by the disease.

By Hebrew law contact with a leper rendered one ritually unclean. It was not merely a question of fearing the contagion, one was not able to enter the Temple, to offer the sacrifices central to worship. The lepers were cut off from God and so were those they contaminated.

Because of this, it took real nerve for the leper to approach Jesus, a holy person, one expected to value access to the Holy. But he recognized in Jesus the healing presence of God and asked.

Jesus responded. Like Elisha, he told the man to engage in some rituals appropriate to healing, but before that Jesus spoke to the man, his heart was moved with pity for the man, and he touched him.

When one has been suffering from total ostracism in which not even one's closest family is willing to endure one's near approach, the simple act of touch brings great healing.

I have only met one leper. At the time I met him, he had been cured, but not before the disease had claimed his eyesight and most of his fingers. Some people were frightened by

his appearance, but he had been embraced with love in the leper colony founded by Father Damian on Molokai. He had been cast off by his family, but had experienced the healing love that Jesus both offers and commends to us, which drew him in and enabled him to live among people with joy and love. He has learned many of the stories of his Hawaiian ancestors and earns his living sharing them with children in the schools around the islands.

Over the centuries, many saints like Father Damian have taken Jesus' treatment of lepers to heart. Saint Francis is one of many who overcame his own great fear and revulsion in order to hug a leper by the roadside. It was a critical moment on his spiritual journey.

But those of us who do not visit Madagascar or Brazil or any of the other countries where leprosy still ravages the population, and who therefore are unlikely to encounter lepers along our pathways, still have important things to take to heart from this incident.

As last week, the face of God shines for us in love and healing. We see in Jesus the will of God that all shall be wholly alive. But there is more.

First, we learn about contagion. Contagion certainly happens. Think of all of your once white laundry after the stray red sock sneaks in. But in the moral universe does it go only from the evil to the good, as in the rotten apple spoiling the whole barrel - or can it go from the good to the evil, wiping it out?

This is an important question about how we regard the world. People generally seem to operate on the assumption that the evil is dominant and so respond with fear and self-protection, pushing the lepers outside the town, to suffer alone. If we believe the promise, the reality of the power of God, then we will not hide; we will know that what is in us can heal the world.

That great preacher of the Orthodox Church, John Chrysostom said of this passage, "For the leprosy did not defile [Jesus'] hand, but his holy hand cleansed the leprous body." The cleanness was stronger than the uncleanness. We are meant to spread the contagion of wholeness, of reconciliation - so that those around about may know that people of God are here.

Further, lepers are not the only lepers. They are all the "unclean", those who are utterly excluded, even if born for inclusion. They are the untouchable. And here in this shining epiphany we are reminded that no one is untouchable to God - and therefore to us.

To respond with love to those who repel us or frighten us is the call of God to each one of us.

So who are our lepers? Are they the homeless or liberals or conservatives or atheists or humanists or fundamentalists or gays or intellectuals or corporate executives or activists or illegal immigrants or the INS?

All of us can find at least one group of lepers there and if we examine our consciences can find several more on our personal lists of the unclean, the people we wish to avoid, the people whose contamination we fear.

And our call is to reach out our hand to them, to embrace them like Francis. We are not called to turn them into people like us. We are called to embrace them as they are, to offer them the love of God flowing through us. We do not know what healing will look like in each case. We cannot determine it any more than Naaman could. But we know that healing involves reconciliation and forgiveness — and that is our job, our calling, our sacred trust, our challenge ñ to touch the untouchable, the unclean, banishing our fear of contamination with our confidence in the love of God in Christ, for us and for them.

God of healing and hope, make of us your hands of blessing and welcome to all of the lepers of our world, in whatever form we find them. Amen.