

Encountering Jesus

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

It's good that we start this morning with the older testament story of Five Star General Naaman.

Like most of us, he's got a problem and he's looking for God to act with all the subtlety of a brass band.

He wants abracadabra and maybe a nice light show to go along with his cure, and when that's not happening, he walks off in a huff!

Which is exactly the way most folks, truth be told, think about God.

We so often think of God as the old bearded man sitting on a cloud, looking down on us like a kid looks in on his ant farm.

Naturally that kind of God only acts in noisy ways – which is maybe why we call earthquakes and floods "Acts of God!"

But the genius of our faith is that God is not like that at all, as General Naaman eventually discovers, as 1 of the 10 cleaned up from his skin disease in the gospel lesson also discovers: God isn't out there, God is here, with us, always was, always will be.

Naaman is a big shot, and it probably killed him to humble himself to make the trek to the defeated backwater dump of Israel to ask the help of a nobody on the advice of a slave girl, ... but desperate times call for desperate measures

The 10 outcasts in the gospel are also a desperate bunch.

Tossed out of their community because of skin disease, they are forbidden to return home...and when they see Jesus passing by, holler out for help, ..., it can't do any harm, can it?

They have leprosy, a word that pretty much covers any kind of skin disease, and it makes them unclean, unwelcome back home, and away they will stay until their condition changes.

And happily today, they get the change!

It's weird how it happens, because instead of Jesus touching them or assuring them that their petitions are granted, he just says: "go show the priests," and as they meander along, lo and behold, the psoriasis, the acne, the shingles ... all gone!

Unlike Naaman, who at last comes to see the gentle finger of God in his cure, these 9 don't even connect their encounter with Jesus with this new found good fortune...

Unlike Naaman, who gets this earth shattering realization that the true God is the God of Israel, the 9 are back to business as usual: back to the country club, back to work, back to the corner bar.

They encounter Jesus, and sure, something good happens, but nothing much changes....

In a way, that's a pretty good description of how most folks experience Christianity.

Oh sure, we get baptized, show up now and then for church, but life rolls on as usual.

This is what we call religion.

It's all wrapped up with rules and regulations, topped off with a superstitious belief in a disinterested God who only shows up occasionally to make a big noise.

But something different is going on with the one who turns around and says thanks.

He finds himself, strangely and unexpectedly, transformed, and instead of religion, he discovers a kingdom.

In a different part of Luke's gospel, Jesus says to you and me:

"And I assign to you, just as my Father assigns to me, a kingdom...."

Somewhere along the line, we lost what it is that Jesus comes to give us....we forgot we are the inheritors of a kingdom, not after death, but now, and we have too often traded in that spectacularly good news for mere religion, for pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, begging the question: why???

Have you ever spent time looking back over your life?

Have you sat with the mistakes and screw-ups and seemingly wrong turns in your life?

For many folks, thinking about the mistakes, the lousy judgments, the bad acts, are the last thing to spend any time on: this is the stuff we want to forget.

And in a way, that's what's going on with the 9 who continue on their way...for them, leprosy is now a thing of their past, it doesn't affect them anymore, so they can just get back to the routines of life.

But when we encounter Jesus, we encounter a savior who says that if we want to live, we need to die first.

Looking for true success?

Carry the cross!

In short, Jesus wants **all of us**: not only our fine pious good deed doing selves, but the snake that lives in you and me too, the cheater, the liar, the adulterer, the con ... and he can only save **all of us** if we are willing to give **all that we are** ... even my rottenness, even my smallness...

When the one fellow returns to say thank you, he returns **in his leprosy**, that even though it's gone, it remains part of who he is, and Jesus welcomes him; this mixed bag of the good, the bad and ugly that defines every human being. Capon, K,J,G.

Here's the thing.

The kingdom of God isn't like a far off Disneyland that admits only the well-scrubbed.

It's here, and we can find it only in our lostness — in our brokenness...because unless we're willing to sit with that lostness, that brokenness, we may never get to peer inside the kingdom's gates.

One deeply spiritual thinker says this:

"Real community requires the confession of brokenness.

And yet how strange it is that brokenness must be "confessed," because every human being is broken — vulnerable.

Why do we try so hard to hide our wounds when we are all wounded?!

If we hope to live in a real community, we really do need to expose our wounds and weaknesses to one another.

Exposing our wounds to each other unlocks the love that pours out of shared woundedness — turning confession into joy." M. Scott Peck, MD (paraphrased).

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu were chatting in India last week...about exactly that ... joy!

And what they shared were 4 habits of the heart and 4 habits of the mind that help prepare any person for the experience of joy...

... of the mind: perspective, humility, humor and acceptance...

...of the heart: forgiveness, gratitude, compassion and generosity...

I'll leave you with this story that, for me, brings home all we've talked about this morning.

Tom Long, a professor at Emory College, had recently moved to a new church, along with several others, so the minister invited the newcomers over for dinner.

Soon, the conversation turned to why these folks had joined.

One was a musician, who liked the church's music.

Another loved the great youth program.

Another just liked the minister.

Then Sam spoke up.

He was a meth addict, who had stumbled into the church, begging for help.

The director of the church outreach center said:

"We've spent our budget for the month.

I can't get you into treatment until next month.

But if you'll stay with us, we'll stay with you."

She took Sam's hand, they kneeled down together, and prayed.

He stayed and got into a treatment program.

"I've been sober for 3 years now," Sam said, "and the reason I joined this church — is that God saved me in this church!"

The other folks looked sheepishly around the table....

"We're here for the music and the parking; he's here for salvation..."

A few weeks later, Sam is in jail.

Tom goes to see him, asking what's happening.

"I was working in the outreach center," Sam replies, "counseling people like myself; telling them that they can do right.

But then I realize, I'm not doing right myself.

I had an old warrant out for my arrest — probably never would have caught up with me, but I knew about it.

So, on Christmas Eve, I turned myself in.”

Sam goes on: “I’ll be out by Easter!

I can’t wait to worship at the church on Easter!

But in the meantime, I’m running an outreach center right here in the jail.

A lot of people can’t read or write, so I write letters to their sweethearts, telling them that they miss them and love them.”

“Every night, we pray.

Just a few show up.

We pray for the other prisoners ... and for the guards.” [Brosend, The Preaching of Jesus, 120-1]

Ten are healed.

One says “thank you” and is transformed.

+amen