

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2006
Mark 1:40-45

"Healed! Cleansed! Washed!"

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Have you ever known of someone who had leprosy? In ancient times, it was a dreaded disease. People who had the disease were viewed with horror and dread. In most instances they lived as outcasts in the societies where they were shunned. But we can't be sure precisely which skin disorder is actually leprosy. The Bible dictionaries state that there were probably a variety of skin diseases which were placed together into the category of leprosy. Some were highly contagious and progressively debilitating. Others were simply the result of the very dry and dusty conditions of the Middle East. Probably something like a hand lotion could have helped considerably.

While our purpose today is not to have a detailed discussion of the disease of leprosy, the Gospel lesson and Old Testament lesson for today both deal with leprosy. They also speak most powerfully of the cure for that disease and in so doing remind us of the power of God and his cleansing work. Indeed, our theme for this day draws those thoughts together as we consider: "Healed! Cleansed! Washed!"

I. The Leper and Jesus

The Gospel lesson for this day relates the story of a leper's request to Jesus. This account is told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. To a certain extent each of the accounts contributes something to our understanding of this event. St. Mark usually has the most compact and pointed account. He simply states that a "man with leprosy came to [Jesus] and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'" Even in these simple words there is a lot to be said. It is remarkable that this leper got this close to Jesus in the first place. Lepers who were in the vicinity of other people were supposed to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" so that there would be no accidental contact with them. They were not supposed to come near anyone. So for this leper to have come to Jesus (in all likelihood through the crowd that was accompanying the Lord) was remarkable.

It is with a considerable amount of faith that the leper addresses Jesus. If you will, you can make me clean. He must have known and heard of the works of the Lord. Perhaps he had been following at a distance for some time and knew the miracle which Jesus was performing. Whatever the case. He has the faith that Jesus can heal him.

The response of Jesus is also remarkable. Again, the Gospel relates very concisely: "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." Jesus here does the

unthinkable. He reached out and touches a leper. There is no fear of the disease from Jesus. Why should there be for as the prophet Isaiah had said, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." And Jesus shows forth his glory as the man is healed.

II. Naaman

850 years earlier it had happened as well. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria plays the lead role this time. Though a man of great renown, he was also a leper. A servant girl from Israel suggests that he see the prophet in Samaria who would cure him. Naaman goes to the king of Aram who sends him to the king of Israel. The king of Israel is distraught at first by the request that Naaman be cured of his leprosy. But the prophet Elisha hears of the need and he gives Naaman instructions through a messenger—Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

For Naaman, it was an insult. He had travelled all those miles from Damascus to Samaria. Here he stood before the door of the house of the prophet Elisha. Not only had the prophet refused to come out to greet him but he had told him that all he needed to do was wash seven times in the Jordan river. Perhaps he wished to see a more spectacular show of power of the God of Israel. But there was only this request, go and wash. In his anger, Naaman said, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" And so Naaman turned away angry. But his servants had the right idea. They reminded him that if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't he have done it? So they encouraged him to do just as the prophet had suggested. And Naaman did just that. He dipped himself seven times into the Jordan and his flesh was restored, and "became clean like that of a young boy."

In the verses which follow the Old Testament lesson, Naaman confesses to the prophet, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel ..." To both a great leader and to an otherwise nameless leper, the Lord has shown his power and his mercy as he cleansed them—one in the washing of the waters of Jordan, the other by the touch of the Son of man.

III. Cleansed and Washed

In religious writing, leprosy is often used as a physical description of sin. Just as leprosy gradually affects and destroys the body, so also sin has effected and destroyed our souls, our lives and our relationship with God and with one another. Because of the strict laws of the Old Testament for showing yourself to have been freed from the effects of the disease, an elaborate ceremony was necessary before the priest would declare you clean. This is what Jesus is referring to when he tells the man in the Gospel, "Go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices Moses commanded for your cleansing ..." What is remarkable is that the ceremony necessary for our cleansing from sin is very straightforward and simple. In fact, the words of Elisha to Naaman can be applied to each of us as well. "Go, wash yourself ..."

Now it is not necessary for us to go to the Jordan to do that. For the washing that we need goes far deeper than the washing of a diseased skin in the Jordan.

Indeed, in this Epiphany season we have been reminded once again that someone greater than Naaman stood in the waters of the Jordan and was baptized. And the heavens were opened and the voice came: "This is my beloved Son ..." In him we can find the answer to the question of forgiveness and peace. In him we find true healing as the Scripture says: "By his wounds we are healed." In Him we find cleansing and forgiveness as again the Scripture reminds us: "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." In Him we are washed and renewed. "For as many of you as were baptized in Christ have put on Christ." We were buried with Him that we might also be raised with Him. Christ is the center, the source, the reason for our faith, our life, our hope.

Perhaps there are times when we are like Naaman, seeking a more powerful sign. We would like to see the work of God shown forth in a way closer to our conception of the glory of God than in such simple ways. Then we need to hear the word of the Lord. There are other times when in our weakness we can only pray, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Then the Lord himself reaches out to us and touches us with nail pierced hands to remind us of his everlasting love.

It is He who offers us his body and blood in the sacrament of the altar and who has washed us in the saving flood of Holy Baptism. For it is a simple message that saves but it is a powerful message as well. The message of the cross and of the crucified is the message that cleanses us from all sin.

Let me not doubt but trust in thee
Thy word cannot be broken.
The call rings out "Come unto me"
No falsehood hast thou spoken.
Baptized into Thy precious Name
My faith cannot be put to shame.
And I shall never perish.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.