

Our Scripture reading for today is about a man afflicted with leprosy. Now, when the Bible talks about leprosy—and the subject comes up a lot more than you’d think—it’s actually using a catch-all term to refer to a *range* of skin diseases that were viewed and treated the same way by the ancient world. These could have ranged from flesh-eating bacteria, to Hansen’s Disease... to psoriasis or eczema. Regardless of their true nature, they were all seen as debilitating and infectious and ritually *unclean*, and without an understanding of the sciences there was no way to cure them or prevent their spread. These diseases started small, usually from one spot—a blemish on the skin—that would over time spread and eat away at the flesh; *some* would move on to nerves, organs, and bone. Each disease moved and disfigured at a different speed, and some were lethal, but they were all painful and seen as highly contagious.

Because of the severity of this “leprosy” and the threat of infection, and because it caused both hideous disfigurement and at times pretty dramatic disability, lepers were outcasts from society. Labeled with the stigma of “unclean,” lepers were forced to keep away from “normal” people, severing ties with their family, friends, communities... everyone. Leprosy caused as much alienation as it caused ailments. Medicine had no cure for these insidious diseases, and most would stick with you for your entire life. And anyone could get it; health, genetics, upbringing, social standing—no matter who you were, peasants and princes alike were susceptible.

Christ Himself had several interactions with lepers during His ministry. He ate with them, healed them... He would even touch them. Which was a radical thing for obvious reasons, both in the eyes of His disciples and society at large.

But our Scripture today takes place eight hundred years or so *before* the birth of Christ. We’re getting closer every week. We’ve got less than two months to get through those last 800 years.

In those days, “Naaman” was an accomplished Syrian general, but he had been stricken with “leprosy.” He learned from an Israelite he had taken captive that there was a prophet who lived within the borders of Israel who could cure the incurable. So Naaman asked his king’s permission to cross into Israelite territory. And his king sent him on the journey, along with a letter and payment, bidding the king of *Israel* to cure Naaman’s affliction.

This request *upset* the king of Israel, because *he* didn’t know anything about treating incurable, infectious diseases. He probably didn’t like having to be in the same *room* with a leper. And if Naaman went home without a cure, it would no doubt draw the ire of his king... and his armies. Israel could be facing an invasion any day.

But the prophet Elisha heard the news of this request, and summoned Naaman to his home. When Naaman arrived, anticipating a magician's cure, Elisha wouldn't even come out to meet him. The prophet sent out a *messenger*, who told Naaman to wash himself in the river Jordan; his flesh would be restored and he would be clean. Now Naaman was a proud man, who had earned all the respect given him, and he was not about to be insulted by some balding vagrant who thinks all it takes to cure leprosy is a *bath*.

Naaman had fully expected the prophet to come out, call on the name of his God, and cure this leprosy with his own hand. Maybe a light show or a booming voice from heaven. Animal sacrifice, incense, the whole shebang. Instead, all he got was a random servant telling him to wash off in some random river in *this* sorry excuse for a countryside? If *that* was all it took I could have done it at *home*.

But as he stormed off, ready to make the long trek to his own land, his attendants came to him and said, "If the prophet had commanded you to do something *difficult*, would you not have done it?" They were right, of course. Naaman had come all this way into enemy territory, looking for magic. He was already bending over backwards for it. He wasn't *expecting* the quest to be simple. Yet, his attendants said, all the prophet was asking him to do was "wash, and be clean." Sure it's not showy or dangerous, but isn't that all the more reason to give it a shot?

And so he did. He went to the Jordan River, the place where Jesus would be baptized nearly nine hundred years later, and immersed himself there seven times. Just as Elisha had said, "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.'"

On the first Sunday of every month, part of cleansing ourselves—preparing ourselves—for Holy Communion is a Confession of Sin... because no matter who *we* are, we are just as susceptible to *sinning* as those ancient people were susceptible to leprosy. "Sins" are that which separate us from God and each other—and none of us are immune to them. As humans, we're all kind of like those Biblical lepers in a way; there's something inside of us that has the ability to spread and eat away at us. Even as generally good, healthy people who for the most part do right and think... right, we all have our blemishes. Spots here and there, the occasional lesion; perhaps even some deep-seated nerve damage. We do things that hurt ourselves and hurt others, we say things that cause pain, we even *think* things that affect our interactions and relationships with our fellow humans and with God.

In the story we heard from Kings today... Naaman was a big deal, yet he had leprosy. We can be good, upright beings, yet still have sin within us—sin that makes its way to the surface and can begin to eat away... at us and our relationships with others. These things we do, say, and think put barriers between us and our neighbors, our human siblings. They force wedges between us, alienating us, separating us as painfully as a leprosy quarantine. Sometimes it's a slow and gradual process, like a spot on the skin slowly getting bigger; and sometimes it's a sudden break, like when a finger rots clean off and the city authorities demand exile.

Now, there are two things we can do when our sins have caused this kind of harm. The *first* one is we can leave it—just don't do anything about it. We're probably familiar with what that can look like in our lives. We... stop calling that family member we verbally tore apart last time we spoke. Why? Maybe we're ashamed... or maybe we think we were *right*, and that's more *important* than reconciliation... or maybe it's just easier to let it lie than to risk starting something all over again. Maybe we *stole* something from someone, and we know we were wrong to do it, but it would cause more trouble than it's worth to come clean or try to make up for it. Maybe we *offended* someone by something we said or did, and it's not *our* fault they have a problem with it—it's up to *them* to get over it, not *us*. Maybe we let someone down, and—well—what's done is done; we might as well just accept that we're a screw-up and there's nothing we can do to *fix* their perception of us.

But... the *second* option, is we can try to find ways to *cleanse* the blemishes leprosy leaves on our *lives*. And when you're talking about sin, that *always* looks too *difficult*, doesn't it? "Cleanse sin from our lives?" But like Naaman learned, even cleansing leprosy *can* be simpler than we thought.

Cleansing ourselves isn't *just* about *fixing* the darkness inside. The leprosy of the ancient world was incurable. Sin isn't something we can just eliminate forever in ourselves. That capacity for harm and for darkness is always floating around in our blood.

Being cleansed is about healing the rifts that we create between us, which in *turn* can heal ourselves. The grace of God allowed Naaman to be cleansed if he just swallowed his pride and took a leap of faith. And when he finally did, he was able to be *free* of the... self-disgust his affliction brought him, and better connect with those *around* him now that this *thing* wasn't between them anymore.

The sins we commit—the large ones *and* all the small ones—separate us from each other, from God, and from ourselves. But cleansing ourselves doesn't take achieving Enlightenment at a remote monastery, or conquering a mountain of self-help books, or

years of strict diet, denial, and self-punishment. It's not about training hard to *slaughter* the sin within in one-on-one combat to the death. The grace of God allows us to be cleansed if we just swallow our pride and our fears and *face* the impact our sin has had on *all* of these relationships—with others and with God—head-on.

We make the phone-call, we knock on the door. We tell that family member we tore into that we *know* we hurt them. We tell them how much we care, and how that made us lash out. We seek healing, sometimes even at the expense of some opinion we were ready to come to blows for.

That person we stole from—whether they knew it was us or not—we seek reparations.

That person we let down: we find them and prove we can lift them up again. And we seek to do better next time.

That person we offended: we find out from *them* just how we hurt them and why, even if we don't understand it or it hurts *us* to hear. We seek connection and empathy, so that we can prevent ourselves from harming them or others in the same way in the future.

And who knows? Maybe this healing knowledge will transform us for the better one day.

Now I don't want you to think that I've confused *simple* with "*easy*." Sometimes the *simple* thing is the hardest thing in the world to do. Some relationships have been so torn apart by sins committed that it could take *years* of hard work to mend them. Cleansing sin isn't something that a quick Band-Aid and a little First Aid can always handle. We've all harmed someone in our lives so badly that reaching out to them just once—no matter how sincere and intense the effort—won't be enough. It *will* take effort, and it can be hard. But if we focus our lives *solely* on just "being *better*" and valiantly *conquering* what sins we find inside us... we will fail. We'll fail ourselves, and we'll fail those we've sinned against. Only God can truly overcome that part of us.

We need to trust God like all the lepers of the Bible... that being "*cleansed*" is far less complex than we start out thinking. It's far less complex than curing an incurable disease, that's for sure.

For Naaman, it *took* a long journey be cleansed; for the lepers in the Gospels, all it took was an outstretched hand. *However* long the journey is for us, if we swallow our pride and our fear and our uncertainty and take that leap of faith into the river of renewal... *we* can be cleansed too.

It's that simple.

Thanks be to God. Amen.