

Epiphany 6, Year B
 2 Kings 5:1-14
 Psalm 30
 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
 Mark 1:40-45

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EPIPHANIES

Today's New Testament reading and Hebrew scripture reading come as two stories of healing of leprosy after an experience of the Divine; after having had an **epiphany**, so to speak,

In between these two stories, we *speak a song* of praise and gratitude – Psalm 30, an individual psalm—likely written by David, unlike so many others. It always strikes me as curious that we sing so much of the service, but the part that is a song book, the psalms, we speak instead.

“I cried to you for help and you have healed me.”
 “You have turned my Mourning into Dancing”
 says David.

A decent response to being cured of leprosy, whatever form it took. Leprosy included eczema, allergy, or many kinds of rash, or even mold on a wall – wall leprosy. Only a priest could decide if it was really leprosy. You can find the details in Leviticus 14.

Of the readings, the one from 2 Kings is the most entertaining, though perhaps not the most profound.

We are trained to dress and behave in various ways for various occasions, and for different people, in order to show respect or to get the response you want. You're not supposed wear a business suit to your pipe fitter job, but you're supposed to at least wear tidy clothing that covers your body to an ordination.

The late Ann Richards, former governor of Texas, said that she received word that Queen Elizabeth II planned to visit Texas. The visit required much preparation. Those who would meet with the Queen took classes on how to behave with the Queen; that you never touch her elbow, what type of jewelry was permissible and a lot of other protocol. The governor had to have clothing made for her that was suitable for receiving the Queen, a pleated silk skirt of a certain length and a raw silk jacket.

Governor Richards said that as she was running across the rotunda of the Capital to wait on the steps for Queen and Prince Phillip, she could hear her mother's voice saying, "Where do you think you're going, to see the Queen of England?"

So now we have Naaman, dressed up for his anticipated reception by the King of Israel.

He's the Syrian Commander-in-Chief, a powerful, honored, and wealthy man, but he's a leper, no matter how much lipstick you put on him.

Throughout the Bible leprosy is synonymous with unclean, unwhole, and unforgiven, even in Syria.

We might know or know of people in the world who are mighty in intellect, mighty in power, ability or goods, but are not so whole in their souls and integrity. Maybe it's even us.

Naaman is traveling down to Israel with some of his stuff – ten festal garments, a lot of money, and his horses and chariots, and servants, and a letter from his king asking the king of Israel to heal him.

prompted to take this trip, if you'll remember, by a young slave girl of Israel.

(One more place where a child and minor Bible character is the catalyst for a major event.)

Now Israel and Syria are in a cold war, with Israel LOSING the last actual conflict.

So, In addition to the extravagant goods he arrived with, he brought also a certain **pomposity** and arrogance that came from his position, and from winning battles over Israel—which he led.

Maybe he also hoped his position and trappings might camouflage his interior sense of unworthiness.

The commander shows up at the king of Israel's door with this letter from the king of Syria, and the King of Israel is **upset**. He suspects it's a trick. He rants and raves and tears his clothes.

"Am I God to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But Elisha, the prophet, The 'Man of God' he is called throughout, heard about his King (You can almost hear his saying, "Oh, for heaven's sake.") and sends a message to have the commander to come see him. Naaman goes, and takes his entourage to Elisha's house. Picture that arrival, if you will.

Elisha stays *inside* his house and sends a servant out to tell the commander

to go wash his flesh in the Jordan 7 times, that then his flesh would be restored and he would be made clean.

Now Naaman's angry. He went away saying,
 "You'd think for **me** he'd certainly
 come out,
 stand and raise his hand,
 call upon the name of his God,
 wave his hand over the spot and
 cure the leprosy."

"He went away in a rage." He deserved better.
 "Besides," he says, "our rivers in Damascus are better than the Jordan River" (no doubt).
 Couldn't I wash in them and be healed?"

Naaman wanted to do it his way. He had a plan for God should behave...
 There is a joke in some of the 12-step programs
 that the theme song of addicts and power obsessive people is
 "I did it my way."

His servants said,
 "If The Man of God told you to do something difficult,
 you'd probably do **that**. Why don't you just try it?"
 So Naaman went down to the Jordan and immersed himself 7times...

And at that moment,
 At the moment of his **humility...**
 At the moment he immerses himself in the Holy River...
 The Waters of the Living God...
 He is cleansed and made whole, restored, it says, to having flesh like a young boy.
 He his healed of his pride arrogance.
 He has met God Herself, encountered the Divine.
He has fundamentally changed.
 He has been forgiven and made whole.
Nothing will ever be the same for him again.

Paul Tillich wrote:

"Decisive spiritual experiences have the character of a breakthrough.
 In the midst of our futile efforts to make ourselves worthy,
 in our despair about the inescapable failure of these attempts,
 we are suddenly grasped by the certainty that we are forgiven, and the fire of love
 begins to burn."

What our text for today doesn't say because it's not part of today's reading, is that Naaman was **so** changed that with his whole entourage he came back to Elisha to proclaim his allegiance to the God of Israel.

With respect toward the 200th Birthday of Charles Darwin, I want to speak of water and Creation.

Often we hear the expression, "water is Life" or we might talk about "living water," meaning water that moves, like a river.

We know human beings consist of 70% water, but don't think about it much.

But did you know that we are fundamentally sea creatures? We were born of water; still we gestate in the warm saline water of our Mothers and are brought out of the flowing water by the Creator. Every time a baby is born, humanity evolves from the sea once more, brought to life by the Creator.

The salinity of our blood today is at the same salinity level that the ocean was when human beings evolved from it. We carry our ocean inside, but it is always with us. Our ability to live on dry ground, outside of the ocean, is conditional on the stability of our interior sea, the one we carry inside us.

When we voluntarily enter water, we, like Naaman, encounter the touch of the living God, the presence of the Creator, because that water is the medium of our beginnings.—

We go back to our roots in water. We can start over, we become born again. Judaism pays much respect to this concept, although I learned it from the Franciscan brothers.

It is no wonder that so many rites and rituals include water, and I'm sorry we tidy Episcopalians don't routinely offer baptism by immersion.

There is no grandiosity on the part of the leper in the Gospel story, and no immersion in water, either but the unnamed man is cleansed nevertheless. And just to be defensive, and not leave you floating on this water issue, so to speak, you can count on quite a bit of water being involved when the cleansed leper showed himself to the priests – something that is no simple matter and ends in getting a certificate of cleanliness.

This story from Mark's gospel was likely written to recall the healing miracle we heard in the earlier lesson today.

It's brief and to the point.

One thing about Mark's gospel:

You don't have to hear a bunch of doctrine and dogma, mostly just the basic facts and how to **live** the way of Jesus.

We hear and see Mark's vision of mission and ministry and love that stands at the center of **his** theology of the cross, rather than hearing what we should believe to get there.

We don't even know the name of the leper in Mark's short gospel passage.

A leper approaches Jesus tentatively

– a bold action on the part of the leper, but he recognizes the presence of the Divine in Jesus.

It says the leper begs on his knees for healing and speaks to Jesus.

"If you choose, you can make me clean."

He didn't come in with a plan for how God should heal him, like Naaman.

He gave Jesus the choice.

One old commentary I looked in, one I keep thinking of getting rid of because I don't usually agree with it (which, of course, makes it wrong), makes an interesting distinction. You have to listen closely to this to hear it, otherwise it sounds like more biblical double-talk.

The commentary says this:

"The leper says, "I am not sure you will, but I think you can." That expresses a heathen idea of God as power.

The true Christian says, "I am sure you will, if you can."

The Christian is confident of the will of God for life, but realizes there are limitations on power of God."

This is a hard teaching.

We still can't easily grasp that there are limits on the power of God, but we can be certain of God's love for us and desire for life. We know God loves us, but sometimes things interfere with the power of God. We don't like to think about God not being 'all-powerful.' But it's either all-powerful or all-loving. Which do you think it is? It's dangerous to love a God that doesn't love you.

Jesus touches the leper (a radical and taboo move) and the man is healed.

You can tell even in this brief story, that his switch has been flipped on.

He has had an experience of God that **changed his life forever**.

This encounter with the Divine has turned the now cleansed leper's

Mourning into Dancing.

“Decisive spiritual experiences have the character of a breakthrough. We are suddenly grasped by the certainty that we are forgiven, and the fire of love begins to burn.”

In last Sunday’s reading we heard that Jesus traveled throughout the towns of Galilee, proclaiming the message and casting out demons.

In today’s gospel Jesus tells the leper to keep his mouth shut, but the man doesn’t, he CAN’T. Fire has begun to burn in him.

I don’t think this was disobedience. I think it was one of those examples where you have to read the bible, in a sense, backwards. Like when the epistle says that women shouldn’t talk in church, it means that obviously women WERE speaking in church.

When a person has experienced the presence of God and been healed, that person has to tell people about it.

A gift like that turned inward
because it cannot be given to those you love
becomes a heavy burden
and backs up the flow of life.

That’s why we spread this good news of love and forgiveness. It’s *for us* as well as for other people.

The Hebrew word mitzvah means both commandment and blessing.
If you don’t want to get spiritually clogged up, tell of your pain, weakness, and blessings - and the gospel news; your encounters with God.

What are you going to do with a joyful experience of God like Naaman’s or the healed leper’s?

An old song I learned long ago sounds like it was written for this text. I’d sing it for you, but you’d be sorry. It says;

I said I wasn’t gonna tell nobody
But I couldn’t keep it to myself
Just couldn’t keep it to myself
Couldn’t keep it to myself
What the Lord has done for me.

Not all transforming experiences of God are like these two healings and cleansings, of course.

But the core of all of our mission
and all of our ministry comes from understanding

our relatedness to each other and to the Creator.

I'll never forget going to Glide Church in San Francisco and watching a ritual of thanksgiving for the completion of parenting classes by two women who could now get their children back from Child Protective Services.

The joy and congratulations from the congregation radiated love and acceptance. You're not likely to see that in the Episcopal Church, but we could change that.

Our hope lies with telling people you trust,
and maybe even those you don't quite trust
about your need for healing and wholeness and the presence of the God of Life.
Our hope lies in encountering God in the middle of that sickness.
Our hope lies in understanding that we are all in this together,
with the Source of Life at our center
and we minister out of our own brokenness, our own unwholeness.

Unlike meeting with the Queen, what we wear won't influence the outcome of the event. You don't need your festive clothing or your chariots (good thing!), you don't need your special dress for meeting the Queen.
You can't do anything else to make yourself worthy.
Come as you are, bringing only a heart and soul that can receive Her.

You are loved as is,
and if you know that because you have individually vividly encountered
the living God,
and you burn with the fire of love,

I hope you live it and dance with it.

And I hope you tell those you love most about it.