

“Wash and Be Clean”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; Dear friends in Christ: Both today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons relate accounts in which someone is cleansed of the dread disease of leprosy. And when the Bible uses the term “leprosy”, it could mean any number of contagious skin diseases; but chief among them is the condition we now know as Hansen's disease. It was the scourge of the ancient world. Completely incurable back then, it's only in modern times that effective treatments have become available – and if I understand correctly, these treatments don't so much cure the disease as they do manage to arrest its progress.

It's caused by a bacterium that attacks first the cooler portions of the body – that is, the areas of comparatively low blood circulation: extremities like fingers, toes, ears, lips, nose, and the skin in general. It also affects the upper respiratory system. And the way it attacks is to deaden nerves so that there's a loss of feeling. It also interferes with the body's natural defenses against infection. So what happens is that you get a small cut on your finger, say, and you don't pay it any mind because it doesn't hurt. So it gets infected – and the body can't fight the infection like it should. Before long the infection is so bad that circulation stops completely and gangrene sets in. It's this that causes the loss of digits that's commonly associated with the disease. And there are other symptoms: oozing sores that don't heal, and the appearance of bulbous growths that range in size from about a pea to a quarter that show up on the lips, eyelids, ears, and nose – and because these growths are extremities of sorts ... well, you can figure it out. When I was in Brazil I saw several cases of a similar condition that's commonly referred to as “jungle leprosy”. Believe me when I say it's frightful to behold.

The good news is that though Hansen's disease is contagious, it's actually fairly hard to transmit from person to person. It usually takes close, long term contact. And it happens that a large number of people are naturally immune. They'll never catch it. The bad news is that while someone might start showing symptoms in as little as two weeks after contracting it, in others the symptoms might not appear for up to 30 years – but during that whole time even though no symptoms are showing, it's still communicable. That is to say, you could catch it in your youth from a parent who wasn't showing symptoms, and then grow up, start a family of your own, and infect all of them before you ever knew you had the disease.

Once the symptoms appeared, however, if you were an Israelite in ancient times, your life as you knew it would be over. The law of God contained a lot of very specific commands about how to deal with a person with leprosy. Upon the onset of symptoms, you were required to go to a priest for examination. He'd check you over, and if there were any signs of the disease you'd be placed in quarantine. A week or so later, he'd give you a second look. If the symptoms were still there or had gotten worse, that was it. You were from then on declared unclean. You could never return to your home or enter into any other. You could never again even so much as touch another human being (unless they too were infected). You had to stay away from towns, villages, and public places. Instead you were driven out to certain desolate hideaways where the rest of the unclean stayed and lived off the charity of family and friends who would leave food and clothing at designated drop off points. They'd leave stuff for you, and then you could pick it up after they were gone because you could have no contact with them.

On their end, your family would have to take everything you ever owned: your clothing, your bedding and blankets, your furniture, even the tools of your trade, and they'd burn them.

Pretty much every trace that you'd once lived among them would be erased. And on your end, you'd have to cover your face and all exposed skin in cloths – both to hide the hideous deformations you were soon to undergo, and also to serve as a warning to others not to come too close. And if anyone did, say by mistake or just by being unobservant, you were required to cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” to keep them away. And so there you'd be: continuing in a sort of slow, living death; your only company your new companions who had had their lives similarly taken from them. And who, because they'd been infected longer, would no doubt be farther along in the merciless progress of the disease. Looking into their rotting faces would be like looking into a mirror of your own future.

And all of this together is why the Bible often uses leprosy as a picture of sin, for what leprosy does to the human body, sin does to the human soul. It corrupts. It disfigures. It robs us of natural feeling, making us numb to the needs, concerns, and suffering of others. It makes our thoughts and desires unclean. But unlike Hansen's disease, no one is immune. We've all got it. It's killing us. And along the way, it's destroying our relationships. Sin is what cuts us off from each other so that we can't love them with the kind of love God made us for. Ours is a love that's turned inward upon ourselves – it's the opposite of what God desires, and that's what makes it so unclean. And the symptoms are easy to recognize: anger, irritation, jealousy, holding grudges, refusing to forgive, greed, covetousness, lust, selfishness, pride ... All these things drive us apart. And even though we try to keep all this ugliness under wraps and out of sight, we're not fooling anyone. I mean, we like to pretend that what's in our hearts and minds is good and wholesome; but we all know better. True, when we see someone else exposed – someone whose symptoms are a little more apparent – we can feel better about ourselves for a brief period: “At least I haven't got it as bad as that guy”. But that's only part of sin's deception – part of the way it infects your thoughts – because yes you do have it as bad as that guy. Just wait and you'll see. In every other sinner you see, you're looking in a mirror.

Due to advances in medicine, leprosy can be stopped if not completely cured; but there is no similar modern scientific treatment for sin. That isn't to say that people don't try. There are all kinds of self-help books and programs you can buy that promise to make you a better person – just as I'm sure there were all kinds of snake oil salesmen throughout history who claimed to have the cure for leprosy. They all have one thing in common: they don't work.

And that's why we ought to sit up and take notice to today's readings, because in them we do see people cured of the incurable and those who are unclean cleansed. In the Gospel it's easy to see how it happens. As Jesus is passing from one village to the next, a leprous man approaches him – but he doesn't come too close. He knows what the limits are. So he falls to his knees at a safe distance and begs the Lord, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” It tells us that he has heard of Jesus. Word has come to him about Jesus' authority to drive out demons and his power to heal the sick. And this man believes what he has heard. He places his hope and his trust in Jesus.

It's then that Jesus does what no healthy person in that culture would ever do willingly: moved with compassion, Jesus closes the gap, reaches out his hand, and touches the man saying, “I will; be clean.” And instantly the man is cleansed. The leprosy leaves him. His destroyed flesh is restored. And, of course, he's been more than healed of a disease: now he gets his life back. He can return home to live with his family. Once again he can enjoy fellowship with his friends. He's no longer an outcast – no longer one of the living dead. And all of this happens when Jesus touches him.

But that's only one of today's accounts of a leper being cleansed. The one from the Old Testament is quite a bit different because in it we're not dealing with a faithful man. Far from it:

Naaman is an idol worshipping pagan. He has long been the enemy of God's people. He's made a very successful career of killing Israelites, plundering their goods and selling the captives he takes as slaves. In this way he's enriched his master, the king of Syria (as well as himself), and he's managed to make his name revered in his homeland and feared in Israel. Everything in his life is good; until he too starts showing the symptoms of leprosy. And it's worth mentioning that because he's not an Israelite, all those laws about how to deal with lepers do not apply. It seems that he was not cut off from contact with others and that he was able to keep his position as the commander of the armies of Syria – at least as long as he was physically capable of performing his duties. And there may be an illustration for us there that has to do with sin. In the world, some things we in the church consider to be sins are actually viewed as virtues. As God's people we uphold love, peace, humility, longsuffering, and forgiveness; whereas the world thinks of these things as weakness. It values instead power, dominion, pride, vengeance; it's about the survival of the fittest and the subjugation of the weak. And this is who Naaman is: to the world he looks great. But underneath his shining armor, his commander's cape, and his plumed helmet, he is rotting away. And so deep down inside, despite his fine outward appearance and arrogant behavior, he trembles.

Thus it is when the Israelite slave girl he gave to his wife as a present offers some hope, he jumps at it. He imagines that he ought to be able to buy the favor of the God of Israel, so he brings plenty of money and gifts with him – along with a large entourage of soldiers, horses, and chariots. He wants to look good. He wants to be healed with his pride intact. And thus he is insulted when the prophet Elisha won't even come out to meet him. Instead the servant of Elisha tells him, "My master says, 'Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean'." This infuriates Naaman. It insults him. If water alone could wash away leprosy, how much better the pristine mountain streams of my beloved homeland than the slow, brackish Jordan in the enemy's desert of Judea. Off he flies in a rage.

But one of his lieutenants (who must have been a very brave man) says, "Excuse me, Sir, but if he had told you to do something very great or difficult to be healed, wouldn't you have done it? How much more then should you be willing to do it when all he said was 'Wash and be clean'?" Naaman considers it. He's come all this way. Why not give it a try? So now he stands at the water's edge. Off comes all the military finery. He had hoped to keep his pride intact; but that's what's being taken from him now. His men who hold him in such high regard see him as he is: naked, diseased, rotting. He doesn't look so important or impressive now. And into the water he goes – not truly believing that this will work; the very idea is silly really – but then, what's he got to lose?

And then when he emerges from the water after the 7th time he dips himself, he is surprised to discover that a miracle has taken place. He's been cleansed. Even the flesh he lost has been restored. He's whole again – his skin like that of a little child. And more importantly, he now believes in the Lord God of Israel and his power to heal and to save.

What I'd have you see is that these two miracles of healing, even though they seem to be very different, are the same. Both men were cleansed by the touch of Jesus. Yes, that's right: in the Gospel we have Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. In the Old Testament we have the Word of God spoken by the prophet combined with the water of the Jordan. It's in the water that the Word takes on physical form; but whether in the flesh of his body or in the water of the Jordan, it's the same Jesus who is the Word of God taking on physical form to wash the unclean with his touch.

And by now the connection to us should be obvious, because what we're talking about and what these stories illustrate for us is Baptism. That's where today Jesus – the life-giving

Word of God – unites himself with water to give us faith in him and wash away our sins by his touch. And what's nice about these two stories is that they show both aspects of it: how in Baptism the unbelieving are made believers and how the unclean (whether or not they believed before) are cleansed. This is important because there are a lot of people in the Christian Church today who deny that Baptism does anything. They are like Naaman in that sense: they think it's silly to believe that all you have to do is wash and be clean. And oddly enough, what they're really trying to do is to keep their pride intact. They don't want to believe that faith itself is a gift and miracle of God. Instead, they like to think that they are able to generate faith in Jesus all on their own, and that Baptism, far from being God's gift of cleansing, is instead their act of obedience – the means by which they give a gift of servitude to the Lord. "See Lord? I did what you told me! My, what a good and faithful person I am!"

It misses the point entirely. We can no more come to faith in Jesus than a leper can be cleansed simply by thinking about it hard and wanting it in the worst way. In fact, it's even more difficult, because we're talking about the leprosy of sin, which is infinitely harder to heal than any disease of the body. No, we see one man who came to faith in Jesus by hearing about him first, that is, the Spirit working faith through the Word; and another who came to trust the Lord God of Israel by washing in the Jordan – not coincidentally the same Jordan in which John Baptized people for the forgiveness of their sins; but both men were made clean miraculously by the touch of Jesus.

And so it is with Baptism. When we bring our unbelieving infants born dead in sin (because they caught it from us) to the water of Baptism, God gives them his Spirit and the gift of faith in Jesus. And others come to faith later in life by hearing the Word first – *that's* the means the Spirit uses to give the gift of faith. But then they come to Baptism for the same guarantee of cleansing. "Wash and be clean." And so they are.

And we stay clean by living in our Baptisms: daily stripping off the pride of life, taking off the rags by which we hide what's inside our hearts, and on our knees, confessing our sins, shortcomings, and failures. "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." And the same Jesus who washed us in Baptism cleanses us again. He forgives our sin. He renews his Spirit within us. And he gives us the grace and strength to rise and live with him. What's more, having restored our relationship with God the Father, he empowers and enables us to restore our relationships with others, changing our hearts so that they can love and serve and forgive, even as Christ loved, served, and forgave us through his suffering and death on the cross.

That, by the way, is what's hinted at toward the end of today's Gospel. Whereas the former leper was now able to return to his home and rejoin his family and friends, we find Jesus left out in desolate places. It reminds us that our uncleanness doesn't just go away when we confess our sins and are forgiven. No, it adheres to Jesus. He's the one who bears the leprosy of our sin. He's the one who ultimately is rejected and cast out bearing all of the world's guilt. He dies as one unclean in order to cleanse us. And that's what makes it possible for him to cleanse us with his touch.

So, let's make sure that we remain where he does touch us – touch us by his Word of forgiveness, by the Water of Baptism, and by his body and blood – for whenever and as often as he touches us, we can trust him to wash us and make us clean. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!