

**Pentecost 18
October 13, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Our readings this morning ... specifically from the Prophet Jeremiah, and the Gospel of Luke ... have to do with hope, and living in wholeness. How can we enter into a faith that will provide hope, and show us a doorway to wholeness in our lives, even when the world around us ... and within us ... seems so fragmented?

This week began with a quick trip up I-95 to North Carolina to visit my 49 year-old disabled son Christopher, and to discuss with his mother some new living arrangements for him. And, the week neared its end yesterday with news of a former son-in-law ... and father to a granddaughter ... threatening suicide and disappearing. I mention this because many of you live with stories like this ... stories of real life situations that fragment your life ... inside and out. Stories that beg for hope ... stories that beg for wholeness.

The readings this morning are not just about the Jewish people in Babylon, and a Samaritan leper ... they are about you and me. They are about a faith in which we can find hope and wholeness. They are about us when we are willing to go beyond our fears, and our need for security, as we seek hope and search for wholeness. They are about what happens to us, individually, and as a community, when we are willing to step forth into our future in the hope of the divine power of God that is alive in each of us just as it was in Jesus.

In the Book of Jeremiah we once again hear about the people of Israel who have been exiled to Babylon. In this case we hear the prophet exhorting his people to build houses, plant gardens, have children ... that is, he is telling them to get on with their lives even if they are no longer living in their home of Jerusalem. Their sense of wholeness as a community had been fragmented. The Jewish people in exile had segregated themselves from the Babylonians and saw themselves as foreigners. Jeremiah is telling them to get over it ... even in a foreign land they can live a new life as a faithful community of God.

But not all of the people in the Jewish homeland had been deported to Babylon ... there was a remnant that had remained in Israel. Many of those who stayed behind lived in an area known as Samaria, and therefore they were called Samaritans.

You've heard me tell the story before. In 586 BCE the Babylonians ... under King Nebuchadnezzar ... overthrew ancient Israel and destroyed the First Temple in Jerusalem. The Babylonians then took the brightest and the best of the Jewish people back to Babylon ... and it is to those Jewish people in exile that Jeremiah is speaking. Then, fifty years later, in 539 BCE, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and returned the Jewish exiles back to Israel. It was

when these exiled people returned home that they encountered those that had stayed behind in Samaria.

From the viewpoint of the Jews that had been in exile the Samaritans were heretics. In the two generations that had lapsed, this Samaritan remnant had “assimilated” with their Babylonian occupiers, and by the standards of the faithful Jewish population these Samaritans had failed to keep the orthodoxy and therefore they had defiled the land. Thus, the Samaritans were despised by the Jews, and were seen as “foreigners” for generations to follow ... even in their own country. Interestingly, even today there is a population of Samaritans who consider themselves to be faithful Jews.

However ... from the viewpoint of the Samaritans ... the Jews returning from Babylon were descendants of deserters who fled from the occupation of the Assyrian troops. The Samaritans felt that the exiled Jews had abandoned their homeland, and therefore they had no claim to be self-righteous about what they called orthodoxy. So, the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans was on both sides of the line.

That sets the stage for the story from Luke’s gospel. In our reading we hear of about ten lepers ... one of them a Samaritan who is called a “foreigner” by Jesus. A Samaritan ... and a leper ... the makings of an interesting story.

Now we know that lepers were outcasts. They were marginalized in their society. They were deemed ritually unclean by their illness, and others had to avoid contact with a person with leprosy for fear that they would themselves also become ritually unclean, and they would therefore be prevented from participating in the religious community, if even for a brief period of time.

For someone with leprosy ... or the skin disease commonly referred to as leprosy in the Bible ... to reenter their society they not only had to be cured of the disease, but they also had to be declared ritually clean by the priests. So, the lepers congregated together, taking care of each other, and forming a small community connected by their suffering and their marginalization. In this community, outside the rules of the religious establishment, it did not matter that one was a Samaritan ... the status of leper transcended other labels.

In the story these ten lepers approached Jesus and called out from a distance, *“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”* Interestingly, at this point Jesus didn’t say anything about healing, but instead sent the lepers to their priests. The author of Luke tells us, *“And as they went, they were made clean.”* Then, the story tells us that one, the Samaritan, saw that he was healed, and he turned back and *“praised God with a loud voice.”* Jesus asks why the other nine did not do the same. Then he said to the Samaritan leper, *“Get up, go your way, your faith has made you well.”*

“Your faith has made you well.” This can also be translated: *“Your faith has saved you”* or, *“Your faith has made you whole.”* I wonder what it would have been like for a Samaritan leper

to feel whole. I also wonder what that *“faith”* that Jesus speaks of might be. The Samaritan leper was outside the Jewish religious establishment. As a matter of fact, the priests he would have traveled to see would have been on Mount Gerizim, the site of the Samaritan Temple. The Samaritan was an outcast in his society who had been beset with a miserable disease that separated him from every avenue of life. Now, he had been healed of his leprosy. And then Jesus had also said that his *“faith”* had made him whole.

Notice that the Samaritan leper had *“praised God with a loud voice,”* and he had *“thanked”* Jesus. I imagine that the faith Jesus was speaking of was that powerful hope that was connected to the divine power of God. Although he was outside the boundaries of acceptance by the mere fact that he was a Samaritan, Jesus had recognized him as another child of God, just like the other nine lepers who were Jewish. I believe that the acceptance the Samaritan leper experienced from Jesus gave him hope in the divine power of God, and this is opened the doorway for what *“made him whole.”* I also think this is a recognition that Jesus understood that his God was more than just a god to the Jewish people.

If God is alive in each of us, just as God was alive in Jesus, then God was alive in the Samaritan as well. When this Samaritan found his way to access that divine power alive in him is when his healing began. This is not about a magical power that Jesus or God uses to cause ... or not cause ... disease to disappear. It is about Jesus opening the door to that consciousness of the divine power that is already present. And, if it is true for the Samaritan, it is true for you and me as well.

So what might it have been like for the Samaritan leper to feel whole? I can only imagine that he was experiencing new life, a new way of being in this life, and a new way of seeing the world around him. Even as a leper ... even as a Samaritan ... he now saw himself as a beloved child of God worthy of God's healing gifts. If he was a child of God, then so were all those others who the world labeled as outcast and who were marginalized. If this could happen to him, what more might be in store for him ... and for the world in which he lived? The Samaritan leper had been *“made whole”* by his faith, his willingness to go where he didn't want to go in the hope of the divine power of God.

These stories are not just about the Jewish people in Babylon and a Samaritan leper; they are about you and me. They are about finding hope and seeking wholeness. They are about what happens to us, individually and as a community, when we are willing to step forth into our future in the hope of the divine power of God. They are about us when we are willing to go beyond our fears, and our need for security, as we search for wholeness.

Yes, we sometimes have to face our own fears to go where we know we are not accepted like the Samaritan leper. But we do so in the hope of the divine power of God that there is wholeness as a child of God created in God's image.

And I imagine that there are those here today that know about being outcast and about being treated as if they had a dreaded disease. And ... if you are one of those who has lived that

experience ... I imagine somewhere in your life you came to know that there was more to life than just labels, and you went with hope forth toward that which seemed so fearful, and in the process found wholeness. One often has to die to self-imposed limitations to experience the new life of being made whole ... that which is promised us as a beloved child of God.

As people of faith, we believe that the God of love comes through those doors of fear and calls us outside into lives marked by peace, servanthood, wholeness, and hope. I believe this community of St. Cyprian's is living in that faith. Not a faith that says that we are just Christians, or Episcopalians, or the community of St. Cyprian's. Rather we are living in the faith that Jesus was speaking about, a faith that will make us whole; a faith that moves us beyond fear. We are living in a hope of the divine power of God to transform us, to encourage us, and to strengthen us for the path ahead.

These stories are not just about the Jewish people in Babylon and a Samaritan leper; they are about you and me. They are about lives that are fragmented by family issues, and turbulent times. But they are also about a holy hope, and they are about a faith that can make us whole. They are about us when we are willing to go beyond our fears, and our need for security, as we search for wholeness. They are about what happens to us, individually and as a community, when we are willing to step forth into our future in the hope of the divine power of God.

Amen.