

# YOUR faith...and the unexpected

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*The Collect for Proper 23, The Book of Common Prayer, page 234*

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THE 21<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (LECTIONARY: PROPER 23C)

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c, Psalm 111, 2 Timothy 2:8-15, Luke 17:11-19

October 9, 2016

**ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY**

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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Some years back Bill read the White House journals of former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson. My favorite story, that says what a different time the 1960s were from today, is from an evening when the President was away from Washington and she had been invited to dine in the home of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his wife.

She was, of course, driven to the dinner, but upon arriving she went to the door and rang the doorbell like any normal person. She was greeted by one of the

home's staff members and ushered into dinner.

What she didn't expect was the stunned looks on the faces of those gathered at the table, none of whom, she soon realized, were the McNamaras. She had been driven to the wrong house and found herself, as First Lady of the United States, crashing a family dinner.

In this morning's reading from the Second Book of Kings, the mighty warrior Naaman, the Syrian arrives laden with wealth at the home of the Hebrew prophet Elisha – and he doesn't get the reception

he expected either. In fact, it was worse than what Mrs. Johnson got. In his case, Naaman arrived at the prophet's humble abode with his grand retinue of chariots and horses, his version of Mrs. Johnson's limousine, and he wasn't even invited into Elisha's home. A servant came out and gave him instructions from Elisha.

So this morning's scripture readings feature two foreign lepers. These readings – from Second Kings and from Luke's gospel – are both arising from the context of Hebrew culture and Jewish religious tradition – so these foreigners are seen both as outsiders **and** unclean; surely of no concern to God.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

Perhaps we can hear these stories in contrast to the celebrity culture in which we live and especially in comparison to the election season and all of the global jockeying for power and wealth that goes on constantly.

Naaman arrives in Israel, having been directed there, utterly improbably, by a Hebrew slave girl – someone he had captured on one of his military forays against the Israelites. We can be sure he had exhausted all possibilities if the voice he decides to listen to is the most disempowered person in his household.

Important to his king,

Naaman is dispatched for healing loaded down with treasure as tribute to the king of Israel. Both the king of Aram and Naaman assume a great prophet will be in the royal court and the persuasion of wealth will be needed.

As it turns out Elisha isn't in the king's palace and doesn't accept the tribute. Further, he evokes rage in Naaman by giving him the simple instruction to wash in the Jordan River. No elaborate incantations or manipulations needed – go and do as directed.

Again Naaman accepts the counsel of a servant and goes and does this humiliatingly simple act and, surprisingly, is healed, restored to wholeness.

The tables are turned, expectations are upside down, power arises from the bottom and poverty, not from the top.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is traveling through borderlands – the spaces on the edges of both Samaria and Galilee, the kinds of places where there is a boundary but not a boundary that can be seen from above – but the outer limits where Jesus would reasonably come across the people who were the least and left out, the unclean, the frightened and frightening, the desperate, those deemed unacceptable in the mainstream or in wonderful places – who didn't travel by chariot or limousine.

In encountering this band of

lepers, Jesus reveals God's presence, proclaims God's favor and the lepers are healed by **their** faith (the faith that is within them), as he says to the Samaritan who is healed.

We have to remind ourselves that Samaritans and Israelites had a common heritage – but over centuries had separated and developed different understandings of faith and practice that became the source of hostility and conflict.

So the healing of a Samaritan in the presence of Jesus was not a given... just the opposite. And yet, in expectations being upside down, as ever, Jesus points out that it is *this* one who returns to give praise and thanks, who recognizes and understands what God has done.

The stories we are hearing are, truly, ancient stories – both because they are old and also because they happen over and over again.

They tell us that God keeps showing up in the world.

Conventional religion continually wants to build a wall around whatever God is doing, take it into custody.

And typically power wants to possess God and rebrand what God does to generate wealth and influence for a few.

And then, God shows up again and again and again where the presence and transformation of

the sacred are least expected, beyond imagination, beyond walls, beyond control.

These passages of scripture redirect us to imagining and, in imagining, being able to truly see that reality, from God's perspective, is infinitely and eternally permeable, transparent, accessible, porous. Walls are not walls to God; anyone may be at the door or, if we enter, anyone may be in the room, and what happens is *not* predicted by human limitations nor customs nor our all too characteristic anxious confusion and desperation for control.

I'm grateful that our building here at St. Mark's is designed in such a way that the rest of the world – God's world – is always visible – and that it is possible for the many doors (we have 27 glass doors) to be ways *out* that are also ways *in* and completely open. Perhaps we are, in this way, somewhat disabused from thinking we own or control God or that God's primary concern is just what we do among ourselves or that what we do is for *us* alone or specially.

Here, as with Naaman and as with the lepers, God welcomes anyone and everyone and calls out from all of us the faith we all have.

When the Samaritan returns to Jesus, he hear Jesus say, "**your** faith has made you well." Jesus has no interest in being a magician or wonder-worker. Every chance he

has, Jesus uses to tell people about themselves, about who they are as people of faith, as people who have faith.

As I said last week in response to the gospel reading in which the disciples were asking Jesus to *increase* their faith, truthfully, it seems to me that faith is a gift that is in every person. It is an element of who we are, created in the image and likeness of God. It is a dimension of being human. We don't need to make it happen and we can't lose it.

I said: Jesus knew faith wasn't about words or concepts or categories – as religions and religious institutions have often taught.

And Jesus knew they had what they needed.

As we do.

Even with the fear that does, at times, stop us in our tracks.

And so we are reminded again and again that faith is a verb, not a noun.... We encounter it on the move, in living, in taking action – and often in relationship with others.

So we see that again, in this week's gospel reading, when Jesus says to the lepers, "get up and go." He sends them on their ways – initially to show themselves to their priests so they will be recognized as healed and whole – no longer unclean, no longer ostracized. But it is **as they go**, as they take action

that their faith heals them.

And so it is with your faith and my faith and our faith together.

I cannot do for you or for us as a faith community what your faith does for you or our faith in action together does here and everywhere we go in the world.

It is all of us rising to the gift and responsibility of all of God's gifts in our lives that allows us to do and to be what God intends to express in the totality of our human lives and in the potential of who we are together as a human faith community in action and in service to the world – the church that is part of the world, not a separation from the world.

Whether the First Lady of the United States, or the commander Naaman the Syrian, or an outcast on the margins, we may be arriving someplace unexpected, going somewhere not previously on the itinerary. Everything that seems apparent, seems obvious, seems like the way the world works really isn't....

We are asked to move with our faith – and as we go, to discover healing, wholeness, potential that is within us, that is in us for ourselves, for our life together, for the world.