

Season After Pentecost [Pr. 23] - Year C

October 13, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, Maryland

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

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

January 3rd of this year was a beautiful day in Israel. I was at the ruins of Caesarea, our first real stop. We sat on ancient rock, feeling the breeze off the Mediterranean Sea and facing the ruins of an arena where crowds had watched chariot races. I was listening to our tour guide, Michel, tell us about this city. Caesarea was built over the site of an ancient Phoenician port by Herod the Great. The same Herod we mention each Christmas. The Roman ruler visited by the magi seeking the newborn Jewish Messiah. The Herod who commanded the slaughter of all Jewish baby boys in hopes of murdering any such Jewish king. Caesarea would be the city where Pontius Pilate would have his residence, except when he needed to be in Jerusalem, to enforce Roman rule or appease the Jewish population..... as he was when Jewish leaders bought Jesus to him and demanded his death. Caesarea was the site for one of my favorite early church stories. It is where a certain gentile man named Cornelius lived who Peter would come to visit and baptize, even though Peter had been thinking only those who were Jews or became Jews could become followers of Jesus. It would be in Caesarea that Paul would be held in jail awaiting transfer to Rome for a new trial he demanded as a Roman citizen. I sat there so thoroughly awed. Here was a place where people I had read about in the Bible had been – Herod, Pilate, Cornelius, Peter, Paul — and now I was sitting looking at the same sea they saw. I remember feeling so absolutely grateful to be there — connecting Biblical dots and marveling. More than once as I wandered the site, I would stop in my tracks, whispering, “Thank you, Lord, thank you.” I was twice blessed that day. First blessed by the opportunity to be there in Caesarea and blessed again to recognize the gift.

I think I knew a glimmer of what that 10th leper experienced centuries ago in a region between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem, once again

crossing boundaries, wandering where he probably shouldn't go, and healing people he was suppose to avoid. There 10 lepers — unclean and outcast — approached him to plea for mercy. They kept their distance, obeying the rules of their exile. “Trained by bitter experience to expect little from those around them.”¹ Jesus sends them off to show themselves to the local priest.... to show themselves to the one who could declare them clean and free to rejoin families and home communities. All ten obey. On their way, all ten are cleansed of their leprosy. But when one of the ten notices, he stops. “Overwhelmed by an unexpected gift, he discovers something more important than obeying the instructions he has been given. He follows his heart. He responds to the need to express the gratitude he is experiencing. He wheels around and goes back to Jesus, falls at his feet and offers thanks and praises God.”² The other nine did what Jesus told them to do. They didn't do anything wrong and were blessed with cleansing. But what then? We aren't told. Likely they each either ran home to restore their past or reclaimed a future. But this tenth cured leper “embraces the present with gratitude”³ and receives a second blessing — the wholeness that comes with *recognizing* blessing and giving *voice* to it. “Your faith has made you well!”

The Welsh poet and priest, RS. Thomas wrote: “Life is not hurrying on to a receding future,/Nor hankering after an imagined past./ It is turning aside like Moses/To the miracle of a lit bush...”⁴ The second blessing of any gift is when we can stay in the present moment long enough to let the appreciation travel from our head to our heart and soul, overwhelming us with a gratitude that must be expressed. I experienced that at Caesarea. I experienced it each of the last 20-some Christmas Days when I've traveled to be with family. I feel so happy and blessed, I could almost fly to Atlanta without a plane. I find myself offering prayers of thanks to God and crazy hugs and words of gratitude to my family all day long. Do you have your own times when you “turning aside like Moses/To the miracle of a lit bush” ? When you find yourself overwhelmed with appreciation and in the moment by awe? Maybe it's sitting around a meal with friends or family. You look around

realizing what a great group of people they are and what a blast you are having and you find yourself blurting out, “I just love you guys.” Or maybe there was a time you saw a shooting star, the Grand Canyon, an amazing sunset and you lean over to your companion to say “Whoa! I’m so glad you’re here to share this with me.”⁵ Or perhaps you were captured in a moment of gratitude when you held or watched your grandchildren, heard that uninhibited laughter of a child, felt their soft skin and hair as they hugged you with utter abandon. And you had to tell them how much you loved them and what a dear gift of God they are. Twice blessed.

This gospel reading is frequently used for Thanksgiving Day worship. But this 10th leper’s encounter with Jesus is not just about having A day to name and appreciate our blessings. Life in its fullest and wholeness is about cultivating a habit of thanks-living – a habit of noticing gifts and blessings and expressing thanks. It is so easy to get tangled up in work, responsibilities, the problems and sorrows of the world, the hurts and complications of living, and rushing in busyness, that we become blind to blessings and miss the second blessing of gratitude. We can be like this little girl’s father. “She worked all afternoon making a special picture for her daddy. Well, maybe it was only half an hour, but seemed to her that it was all afternoon. When he came home, she ran to give it to him. He glanced at it, said, “Sure, honey, it’s nice,” and proceeded to tell his wife what a rotten day it had been. Disappointed, the little girl retreated to her room. At dinner, she sat quietly, picking at her food, and then asked to be excused. Her mother later tucked her into bed and returned to the den, where the father was reviewing some papers for the next day. “Megan prayed for you tonight,” the mother said. “She prayed, ‘Please let daddy see me again.’” And the daddy got up from his chair, retrieved his daughter’s picture and went to his daughter’s room. He knelt by her bed and took her in his arms. He said over and over, “Daddy sees you again, honey. Daddy sees you again.” He almost missed being twice blessed.

“Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something larger, bigger, and grander than we could imagine and at that moment joins us to God, the font of blessing itself.” Gratitude is powerful. “It frees us from fear, releases us from anxiety and emboldens us to do more and dare more than we’d ever imagined. Even to return to a Jewish rabbi to pay homage when you are a Samaritan” because you’ve realized that Samaritan, leper, or even healed leper doesn’t begin to capture what that rabbi showed you to be — a whole, accepted, beautiful child of God.⁶ Thanks-living is a holy habit. Noticing any manner of goodness each day will refresh your soul. Practiced daily, gratitude will transform the way we see, hear, and feel. It will lead you to find “treasure in the plowed fields of the routine and see daily bread as God’s provisions.”⁷ It can help us learn to stay in the present moment to stand firm in the power of a blessing that can loosen our grip on regrets of the past or amped up fears about tomorrow. The way of gratitude is the way of living that frees and empowers us to life in all it’s fullness. Today, Jesus is telling us to try it. Don’t wait until Thanksgiving Day or a trip to Caesarea. The way of gratitude is the power of God to bless us twice, a power that will transform us and move the world toward the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 10/12/13

ENDNOTES

1. David Lose, “Second Blessing” notes on Luke 17: 11-19 posted on October 7, 2013 on www.workingpreacher.org

2. Paraphrased from Robert Durham’s sermon, “Improvisational Gratitude” posted on www.Day1.org on October 14, 2007

3. Suzanne Guthrie, “Gratitude and Insight”, notes posted *At the Edge of the Enclosure*, 2013 at <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/proper23c.html>

4. R.S. Thomas from his poem “Miscellany” as posted by Suzanne Guthrie, “Gratitude and Insight”

5. Two examples adapted from David Lose, “Second Blessing”

6. David Lose, “Second Blessing”

7. Brett Younger, “Excessive Gratefulness” posted on www.goodpreacher.org