

It probably says something about my childhood that as soon as I hear the word leper, I immediately think of Ben Hur. My family loved all the epic biblical movies - The Ten Commandments, Spartacus, and especially Ben Hur. The more swords and sandals, the more we loved it. No wonder that whenever I hear a biblical story about lepers, my mind goes to Judah Ben-Hur's poor mother and sister, Miriam and Tirzah, who, without getting into too much of the plot, are found to have contracted leprosy after having been unjustly arrested and forced to spend years in a dank Roman prison.

At the end of the movie - which is fictional, just fyi (I feel like I need to say that seeing as how when I googled Ben Hur one of the most searched for questions was "Where is Ben Hur in the Bible?") - Judah Ben Hur has rescued his mother and sister from their leper colony and is carrying them through the streets of Jerusalem looking for Jesus. He hopes that Jesus, this Messiah who has been woven in and out of Ben Hur's story since the opening fanfares, will be able to

heal them so that he can bring them home and begin a new life. But as they arrive in Jerusalem on a bright and dusty Friday morning, Jesus is nowhere to be found. No one is anywhere to be found. The streets are empty save for one, lonely blind beggar, who is sitting by a fountain and calling out "Alms for the blind!" and extending an empty cup to the strangers he can hear but cannot see. Ben Hur puts a coin into his cup and asks where everyone is. The beggar tells him that everyone has gone to see the trial of the rabbi Jesus, who has been arrested and is standing before the judgment seat of Pilate. Just at this moment, another small band of people enters the scene. Seeing Miriam and Tirzah, they cry out "Lepers!" and begin throwing dirt and trash and anything they can find. Ben Hur hunches his shoulders against the blows and runs away, leaving the audience alone with the poor blind beggar, who, in a moment of great cinematic comedy, slowly lifts his cup and, deadpan, inverts it, leaving Ben Hur's coin to thump harmlessly into the dirt.

As a kid, I was fascinated by this scene. I was fascinated by the women, whose leprosy was always hidden in shadow and head scarves. What you could see was how people reacted to them, and their horrified expressions scared and intrigued me. What was it that frightened them so much? What was it that could cause so much fear that a poor beggar, living from day to day on the coins he managed to scrape together, would rather drop a denarius into the dust than touch something that had once possibly touched a leper. What was so terrifying that people would do anything, anything, to avoid becoming one of them?

Ancient societies did do anything they could to avoid the spread of leprosy. Lepers were ostracized, refused admittance to general society, to the temple, to life in any real form. Leprosy at that time, we know, was a word meant to describe multiple different skin diseases and not just Hansen's disease, which is what is now called leprosy today. All of these diseases, though, were so contagious and

so incurable that there was an eternal fear of contamination. The Torah has extraordinarily detailed laws about how to evaluate sores on the body, how to diagnose leprosy, what to do with lepers and then verse upon verse about what to do with their clothes. Mostly, in Jesus' time, lepers were told they were impure, "unclean," and then scooped up and dumped into the dirt. People would do anything, really, to not become a leper.

It's no wonder, then, that in the two stories we hear today the lepers also try to distance themselves from their disease. Naaman goes to the prophet Elisha for healing, travels a great distance with horses and chariots in a grand, bombastic style that would make Ben Hur proud. But when Elisha sends his messenger out to tell him how to be cured, Naaman complains. Why do I have to go wash in that mucky old Jordan? Why cannot Elisha come out and heal me himself? Not exactly the talk of someone who feels powerless before a disease that would exile him from all normal life. What Elisha is asking is so

easy, but Naaman still resists. Is he vain, or simply in denial? Perhaps he doesn't want to admit that his condition requires such extraordinary measures. Perhaps he imagines he just has a little touch of the leprosy, not that he's actually a leper.

Then there are the lepers who are healed by Jesus' hand in the Gospel of Luke. Ten lepers, sharing the common rejection of their community, so used to being on the margins that even when they hear of a man who could heal them, they cannot draw close to him, choosing instead to keep their distance as they cry out for mercy. Jesus speaks to them from the same distance telling them to go show themselves to the priests so that they can be restored to their lives. And as they go, they are healed – a miracle! But then, an even greater miracle. One of them turns back to give thanks. One of the ten is willing to admit just how miraculous this thing was that had happened to him. Rather than moving on to the priests so that he could move on and put his leprosy behind him, this man sees the

truth. He recognizes the depth of the miracle, because he remembers who he was – I was a leper, and you healed me.

In both of these stories, it is the final acknowledgement of who these men are – that they were really and truly lepers – that allows them to access Grace. It is when Naaman acknowledges that he really is a leper, just like every other leper, that he is broken down enough to do what Elisha asked him to do and so is healed. It is in acknowledging that this tenth man really was a leper and really was healed that allows him to feel a sense of profound gratitude and to share that gratitude with the one who had healed him. It is in saying, "I'm a leper!" that these men found blessing and restoration, that they found God reaching out to them and saying, Yes, child, you are a leper, and you are still my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed. We say these words every day here at Atonement. It's an old-fashioned part of the

liturgy, not to be found in any modern Episcopal prayer book. And, some would argue, it's an old-fashioned theology, the idea that we human beings are unworthy and unclean, spiritual lepers. God created us in God's image, the argument goes, so how can we not be innately beautiful, worthy of love, healing, blessing? There is much to be said for this way of thinking, especially as a counter to wrong-headed religion that for years has told people that they were not quite enough – not straight enough, not male enough, not white enough, not rich enough. Yes, we are worthy, yes, we are beautiful, beloved and chosen by God our loving, ever-faithful Mother.

And yet, let's face it...we are also lepers. We are also sick, broken, outcast from ourselves and from the world. We are desperately in need of Grace. In the words of the old prayer book, there is no health in us and we are miserable, pitiable, offenders. There is no denying it. The residue of our daily sin covers our souls like scale. Each and every day we choose ourselves over others. Each

and every day we judge our neighbor and ignore God. Our individual and corporate lives are filled with waste and greed – how else to explain the morass of lies and cruelty we're drowning in these days? How else to explain how the world seems to be getting progressively worse, more selfish, more mean and less merciful? Human beings may be created in God's image, but human beings have made a mess of that image. Look around: lepers, all.

It is in acknowledging this that we find our hope. For God has never asked us not to be lepers. God has never said that She would stop loving us if we continue to sin. God has never looked out upon us and thought that we were too marred, too scaly, too sin-sick to heal, forgive, and redeem. When God sent her Son to proclaim the Good News, the first words out of his mouth were these: the Kingdom of God has drawn near, repent and believe the good news.

And the good news is this. God loves lepers. God forgives us our sins, heals our brokenness, raises us up from the dust and makes

us worthy to stand before her. God reaches into our lives and gives us lepers the Grace that we so desperately need. And when we recognize this, when we see that we are unworthy of this Grace, and then see that all of this Grace is ours to claim anyway, then the real miracle. Because then we can tap into a wellspring of gratitude unlike any we have ever known. Then we can run and leap and jump for joy at the great gifts that God has given us. Then we can share the Good News that our salvation and the world's healing depend, not on us, but on a God who is gracious and full of compassion, whose righteousness endures forever. So instead of pretending that we don't need God's help, let's wash in the river of God's forgiveness. Let's live together without fear, you lepers, in this holy colony, knowing that God is transforming it and the whole world into a colony of heaven.

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*13 October 2019*

*Church of the Atonement, Chicago*