

February 15th, 2009
6th Sunday after The Epiphany

by Carren Sheldon

There are two stories about lepers in today's scripture: one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the Gospel. I have never known a leper, or met one, or even *seen* a leper...and yet I have this vivid mental picture of the leper suffering, and the dead skin falling away from the leper's body: repulsive. I don't know where I get that image – because neither of today's stories says anything about what the leper looks like. Was it in a Monty Python movie? Am I mixing up Bible stories?

Of course, biblical leprosy is nothing like 21st century, clinical leprosy. Since 1982 there's been a cure for clinical leprosy...but biblical leprosy was a societal condition as much as it was a disease. Essentially, a biblical leper suffered, and had no hope – but God.

The leper in my mind's eye is also an outcast. There is a long history of banishing lepers to prevent the disease from spreading – but there's nothing in either of today's stories to indicate those lepers had been outcast. On the contrary, in the Second Book of Kings, Naaman is a mighty warrior leper. *A mighty warrior leper?* Naaman was a successful, powerful, privileged man. And a leper. He must have suffered. Mighty warriors hardly ever follow advice from their wives' enemy slave girls unless they're desperate. Even with all his power and privilege, Naaman had no hope – but the God of Israel.

With biblical leprosy, the cause is murky – possibly a punishment for sin; and the cure is unknown. Susan Sontag wrote, years ago, on *Illness as Metaphor* – that diseases with murky causes and ineffective treatments are often awash in significance. Cancer and AIDS are two examples from this day and age...but they're not the only sources of suffering with murky causes, hints of shame and no hope – but God: addiction, domestic violence, grief, mental illness, foreclosure...

No wonder I can see the leper so clearly. I know that leper. I am that leper.

Molting out of my old, dead skin, ashamed, dismayed, no hope – but Jesus.

When Jesus healed the leper, everything was different from Naaman's healing in the Hebrew Scriptures. Both lepers did the same things: they came to God and submitted. It's what God did that's different!

The God of Israel made Naaman clean, like a young boy. Poof. Naaman was restored to his original condition.

Jesus *was moved*. Jesus *reached out* and *touched* the leper – with His *incarnate, fully human* hand – God *made contact* with the sick, human and said, *I do choose, be clean...* Jesus' will and Jesus' action transformed the leper...and *he was never the same*. In Jesus, healing is not a restoration to our mint condition, it might not even be a cure – in Jesus, healing is Creation.

In our sickness, we molt. Our dead, flesh falls away and we are transformed from the inside out. Jesus was always talking about that. Changing from the heart. Marcus Borg wrote, "Death as an image for the path of transformation points to a dying to the world of conventional wisdom as the center of one's concern. It is a striking image for the path of spiritual transformation. Not only is death the ultimate letting go, and thus the opposite of grasping that marks the life of conventional wisdom, but the process may often involve the stages we have come to associate with the physical process of dying: dying, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The path of death is also, for Jesus, the path to new life. It results in rebirth, a resurrection to a life centered in God.

So, now, when Jesus touches *us*...everything is changed yet again...everything is different for us than it was for either of those lepers - because now – *the tomb is empty*.

It's that old saw about Jesus meeting us where you are – but never leaving us there.

When Jesus heals us, we will be created anew – our pre-leprosy, pre-addicted, pre-abused, closeted and pre-lost, pre-humiliated selves are dead – but our tombs are empty – because Jesus creates us anew.

As we approach the season of Lent, the season for approaching God and submitting – just like Naaman and the leper healed by Jesus – I am grateful that we are a people of sacrament,

a people blessed by outward and visible signs God's inward and spiritual graces - through the most human kinds of practices – like soul bathing at Baptism, and soul nourishing at the Lord's Table,

and of anointing the sick,

and that Church of Our Saviour has a sacred healing ministry, at work, in our midst.