

**Sermon for October 9, 2016 (Proper 23, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-15; Psalm 111; Luke 17:11-19

Title: Go and Show Yourselves

My friends: when God gives you a simple command, are you ready to act in faith, even when the consequences are unknown and unpredictable?

Lepers were a major problem throughout the ancient world.

Today, this infection is officially known as Hansen's Disease.

It is a slow-developing, long-lasting bacterial infection which damages the nerves in a human body and has a major effect on the skin.

Although leprosy was feared by all people in ancient times, today we know that it is actually not very contagious.

Hansen's Disease is easily treated by antibiotics, and since the mass production of antibiotics began in the 1940s, it is no longer a public health concern.

Today, thanks be to God, we no longer have to worry about lepers wandering the streets, being ostracized and feared due to their altered appearance and to the fear of contagion.

But it wasn't always this way. It used to be very, very different.

This past week, we celebrated the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi – that great imitator of Christ. You may recall how Francis made his decisive break with his father in the town square before the Bishop by taking off all of his clothes and giving them back to his father. Then he walked off naked and free into the countryside to serve God alone. Of course, at that point, he had no plan!

He had no idea at all about what to do next.

But Francis DID know about a lepers colony nearby. It was a place that previously he used to avoid at all costs, even holding his nose if he was too close to it.

But now that he was determined to walk in the ways of Christ, he had a feeling that this is where he was supposed to go. To a house where lepers lived.

As his biographer Bonaventure described it, Francis “washed their feet, bandaged their ulcers, drew the puss from their wounds and washed out the diseased matter; he even kissed their ulcerous wounds out of his remarkable devotion” (The Life of St. Francis, Bonaventure: The Classics of Western Spirituality, p.195).

It was lepers who gave Francis his first taste of true ministry in the way of Christ.

Both of our Scripture readings this morning center on people afflicted by leprosy.

Luke’s Gospel gives us this odd tale about 10 lepers in a small village near Samaria. It is unique to Luke, as are most of the stories involving Samaritans.

And it seems directly intended to reflect our first reading, the healing of Naaman the Syrian by the prophet Elisha - Aram being the ancient name of modern-day Syria.

Now, we need to remember that by the time of Jesus, the Samaritans and the Jews understood themselves as rivals.

Each group had its own temple, its own version of the Torah, and its own priesthood.

I should say that each group HAS these things, for there are still Samaritans today who worship on Mount Gerizim with their own priesthood.

Of course, we tend to view the Samaritans now as second-class imposters. When people visit the Holy Land today, very few go to visit the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim located near the Palestinian city of Nablus.

The Judeans, the Jews - they won the historical claim to orthodoxy and the Samaritans have been largely relegated to a footnote in history.

Today, there are less than 1,000 Samaritans left within the state of Israel.

With this background in mind, remember that when Jesus speaks to the lepers and says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests”, he does not specify which set of priests they were to go to!

If they go to Mount Gerizim, that’s about 15 miles up into the mountains, which would be a very full day of walking.

But if they go to Mount Zion in Jerusalem, that's closer to 40 miles away, which would take at least two full days of travel.

In either case, the command to "go and show yourselves to the priests" is a simple one, but it is NOT an easy task. A significant amount of travel is required.

Naaman the great general faced a similar situation.

To "go and wash seven times in the Jordan River" sounds simple enough, but the Jordan River was at least 20 miles away.

And when you are traveling in a large caravan, that trek would take an entire day.

And besides, the Jordan – both then and now – is not much more than a slow muddy stream. To wash in it would require this man of power and wealth and prestige to strip in front of his entire entourage and go down into the mud.

Both Naaman and the 10 lepers are given a simple command which requires an investment of effort on their part.

In both stories, the prophet of God heals with a word, by issuing a simple command.

But the healings actually take place ONLY when the command is obeyed and followed.

And THAT is the crux of the matter.

A word from God is received. And then a decision must be made.

Do they obey and follow, even though effort is required and the outcome is not clear?

In my opinion, this is the hard part.

How do you obey and follow a word from God when there is no guarantee that it will be worth it and will work out as you hope?

This is precisely the scenario that Erin and I faced when we received the call to care for the two foster children with us now.

This is their fourth time in the rectory with us. And after their third stay with us in June, it became abundantly clear to both Erin and me that if DHHS called us again to care for these two children, then that was the voice of God giving us a clear command.

So when the call came in August, we knew that God wanted us to respond and to take care of these two vulnerable little people.

But there were some major obstacles. Both of us have demanding careers. How was the boy going to get back and forth to school in Portland every day? And more importantly, was there any daycare available for the baby?

When the call came from DHHS, we had about one hour to make our decision. At the time, there were no daycare spots available. All of the area childcare centers were full. This was mid-August, after all, and all their spots for the new school year were reserved.

But without full-day childcare, taking care of these two was going to be a major hardship. Could we accept this clear call from God without knowing how it would all work out?

Yes. By the grace of God, Erin and I did what we knew we had to do. We said yes to the call from God which was clear, even though the implications of that yes were far from clear.

And so the kids came back to our home. And a few days later, we received a call from the Catherine Morrill Day Nursery in the city informing us that ONE spot had opened for all-day nursery care.

Furthermore, they explained that, because this baby was in the DHHS system, she was given first priority and could begin in just a short period of time.

In addition, a volunteer driver stepped forward to take the boy each day to the Lyseth Moore Elementary School in Portland.

And so what I know in my heart to be true was confirmed yet again. When God gives you a clear word, you have to trust it and act on it.

Naaman the Syrian had no assurance that this reported prophet Elisha could heal him simply by issuing a directive! With no direct contact, no touch, no personal communication at all. He had no guarantee that he would not end up looking like a fool, naked and covered with mud in the Jordan and STILL afflicted by his disease.

All he could do was to trust that word from the prophet and to act on it.

The 10 lepers who called out to Jesus had no assurance that Jesus could heal them from a distance – with no touch, no direct contact.

That's not usually how these healing miracles take place!

They had no guarantee that they would not go on this long trek to the priests and wind up embarrassed and STILL afflicted by their disease.

All they could do was to trust that word from the Lord and to act on it.

Is it any different in our lives today? We are never told what will happen in the future. There is never any guarantee that things will go as we hope, or as we ask.

But if we are looking for God, and listening for God, and if we are open to God, then we will hear a word from God giving us a clear directive.

Not all the time! For some, this clear word is rare.
For others, it comes on a regular basis.

But no matter the frequency, that clear word always forces our decision.
We must choose. We must act.

We can pull back in anxiety, in fear, unable to control the potential consequences that may result.

Or we can step forward to trust in that word from God and to act on it.

I don't know what clear and direct word from God you will receive.
But I do know that these directives are usually quite simple, but rarely easy.
And they require us to act in faith, trusting that God will take care of the consequences.

Can you do that?

Can you act in trust and in faith, allowing God to handle the future?

May it be so, because there is no better way to live this human life. Amen.

