

On Our Way

Preached by

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Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 66:1-12 (portions)

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of the name; give glorious praise. All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.”
Come and see what God has done: God is awesome in deeds among mortals.
The Lord turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.
There we rejoiced in God, who rules by might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of the Lord’s praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.
For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.
You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs;
you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

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.”

Message: *On Our Way*

November is the time of year in our nation and in the church when we turn our hearts and minds more fully toward gratitude. Even in a year such as this, we can give thanks for the bounty of the earth, the strides of medicine, the cooperation among local neighbors for nurturing children and caring for the elderly.

As a congregation, we can give thanks for the things we have been able to do even in “locked down circumstances”—mornings given to thanking our elderly, cleaning up roadsides, gathering collections for our community partners and other service to our membership and our neighbors. In these shuttered days our thanks may sound less fervent, be felt less frequently. So perhaps we need a grateful November more than ever before and our story of the ten lepers helps us reflect on the complexities of giving thanks.

I am frequently asked, and I suspect most preachers are, at one time or another, “The text (to whichever one they are referring) has so much in it—why didn’t you talk about all of it? I understand this actually means “Why didn’t you preach on the part I’ve been wondering about?” I wouldn’t be surprised if I were to be asked that after this morning’s message.

I typically respond to that question by saying that one of the besetting sins of almost all beginning preachers—one I committed myself with great frequency—is to “attack” each text as though

the first occasion is the only chance we'll have to address it in a 30 year career. I am now content to focus on one thing and wait for other occasions.

On the other hand, while I'd be the first to admit that almost all scriptural texts have depth, complexity and layers that offer multiple opportunities for preaching, perhaps nowhere quite so evident as in the text about the ten lepers, my great fear has been, having preached on a text once, there would be no new inspiration the next time it rolled around. I am ironically reassured by hearing that "people don't remember sermons anyway, so it wouldn't be a problem if I preached the same thing twice."

This is not the first time I've preached on this text, not even the first time at UCF. This is one of my favorite texts. There is at least one sermon in every sentence. I could preach on this text 12 weeks in a row and not break a sweat.

None-the-less, I stuck with my typical practice of reading and re-reading the text aloud, walking around my office in a left-of-center Protestant Church in 21century USA, serving a congregation in a nation in the midst of a pandemic, suffering through a radical economic downturn, at odds with our fellow citizens perhaps as at no time in our past (or at least since the Civil War).

As a people and as a congregation, we are somewhat anxious—anxious about our health, anxious about the narrowed shape of our lives, anxious that someone do something about all this even though we don't know what that something should be and, in our saner moments, we are wise enough to know it's not up to someone, but to all of us. Along with Jesus, ten lepers and some on-lookers, and all of us, it quickly became a crowded room. At least it was crowded, until I realized that, as they say about the interpretation of dreams, we're everyone in the dream—we, the church, are everyone in the story, playing different roles at different times.

We are a church seeking a little mercy, a little grace. We're not asking for too much—the freedom to gather again—a gift we probably took far too lightly in the past, but never will again. We'd like a little more money to help meet the needs of the community. Currently we are holding the line with regard to our own expenses and income, but it's a fragile line. For the world, we are asking for enormous things—the healing of creation, the end to a pandemic, peace and prosperity. But for ourselves, we're just asking for a little of this, a little of that—a drop of grace, a soupcon of mercy.

Like the ten lepers, we ask, but keep our distance, muttering prayers to ourselves we don't say aloud or send for the weekly email to our community of faith—as though asking for little things in the face of great need is somehow unfaithful. It's possible we even keep our distance from ourselves and our own needs. Because, you know, we might actually get what we are asking for and then what?

Asking for healing and being healed is always a risky business. More often than not, healing brings not only joy and comfort, mobility and freedom, community and welcome, but lands with a thump; or comes with a little more responsibility than we wanted. Healing changes things or worse yet, changes us. So we'd like to be healed, but we don't want Jesus to get carried away as he has been known to do.

And, don't you know, that's just how it happens. We have a little more energy, a little less anxiety. Even the smallest shift allows us to spend what we have in time, energy and yes, money, on the things we think are important—family relationships, reading, working, educating, getting outdoors. The Spirit continues to show up in streamed worship, zoom fellowship and education, meetings and drive-bys, and joint community efforts to serve our neighbors. The Spirit continues to show up in people's homes and hearts and prayers. Even in this extraordinary time, healing is happening—in incremental, step-by-step ways that we might miss if we don't give such moments our full attention. It's the kind of soul-soothing, spirit mending healing that makes for wholeness and hope.

Jesus says, "Go. As one people, name your bounty, the grace of God in your lives. Go. Act like you are healed." And that's what we're doing...

But the healing isn't over. Apparently it's not over when we're doing better, feeling better, have a vision, have a plan, are being formed and reforming all the time as a community of the faithful, responsible to and for one another and for the whole world.

According to the text, the healing isn't over until ... It isn't over until we turn and give thanks and praise to God—until we fall on our knees with gratitude, until we get up and go on our way into the world singing songs of praise and sharing the news of a merciful God—until our gratitude is so great we have no choice but to put ourselves, body and soul, into living, sharing and serving.

The truth is that we are never fully healed, but then again we are never as broken as we allow ourselves to believe. It is in the rhythms of knowing our need, asking for mercy, accepting God's grace, naming the bounty and giving thanks through sharing and service that we will hear the blessing and affirmation of Christ, "Our faith is making us well," moving us ever toward wholeness and our created goodness."

So, let us get up and be on our way.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Gracious God: In this season when shadows of clouds race across the earth, when cool air from distance places blows our way and the sun shines down on it all – we are reminded of a planet, a world, a nation all under your care and formed by your breath. We are reminded of gifts and needs among people we do not and may never know – we are reminded we are not alone in blessing and in need.

We turn our prayers to the planet that its powers for self-healing might once again be unleashed, as we seek to be better and better stewards of all the earth.

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We turn our prayers to people in every place, learning to be apart when celebrations would draw us near; those who do not allow their lives to be put on hold and those who must, as with all people we look forward to future togetherness. We pray for the day when all these things come in their own time, not driven by starvation or disease, fear or war, violence or hatred. We pray for the power to do the things that make for peace in our lives, homes, schools and workplaces.

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We turn our prayers to ourselves and our loved ones, our neighbors, friends and co-workers -- so that the healing we first seek for others, we might know in our own lives, bodies stronger, minds more clear, relationships reconciled, hope growing, patience and strength in the waiting for that which is to be and that which may not be as we wish

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All this we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray together...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.