

Ten Lepers and the Kingdom

So, here's a little tidbit about today's story. The text says Jesus was traveling in the region between Samaria and Galilee. But here's the thing - there was no region between Samaria and Galilee. They shared a border.

Now, maybe Luke meant he was crossing the boundary between the two, or maybe Luke was unclear on the geography.

But it's more likely that the description has little to do with geography and everything to do with God. It gives us a way into the story that makes it more than a miracle story or healing story.

The story happens in what might be called a liminal space. It's similar to a threshold like we talked about at Lent midweek.

It's an in-between space that can be a place of disorientation or ambiguity. In scripture, liminal spaces are places of potential danger, but also of profound encounters with God.

So if Jesus is in this liminal space between Galilee and Samaria, then it will help us to take a closer look at Galileans and Samaritans. Galileans were typically Jewish in origin and religious practice. The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of their religion.

The Samaritans were mostly not considered mainstream Jews. Although they worshipped the same God, their practice of their religion was different, and the center of their religion was Mt. Gerizim. Their ethnicity was mixed, owing to their conquest by Assyria centuries before. In general, the Jews and Samaritans despised each other.

But here, Jesus is between the two. In a sense, Jesus is bridging the gap between Samaria and Galilee.

And he meets the sick men in this in between space.

The ten men are in an in between place as well. Originally this story is told as being 10 lepers. We know now what causes leprosy and people who study these things believe all kinds of disfiguring skin diseases in the Bible were called leprosy.

Regardless, people with these diseases were also in an in between place.

They were often not allowed to live in the midst of people – they were forced to live on the edges of the community, not quite ostracized, but not quite part of the community.

Actual leprosy is contagious, so part of that was the health concern. And the disfiguration and deformity set them apart. Touching them was considered taboo.

And yet, that in between place is precisely where Jesus met them.

We are told that at least the one is a Samaritan. Samaritans were also in an in between place – not quite Jewish, but not really Gentile either.

But sickness shows no boundaries. Major Sickness is a liminal experience...where what's familiar is behind and what's ahead is unknown.

And for Jesus, compassion and healing show no boundaries either. In that in between place, Jesus meets the sick men and heals them.

We've all experienced in between times...times of uncertainty...times when something familiar has come to an end and we don't know what's next.

Some of us have had experiences where we or someone we love has been seriously ill. It's a time of uncertainty. Maybe even a time between life and death. The time between when a loved one goes in for a scary surgical procedure and the surgeon comes out to let you know how it went is a liminal time.

We've experienced the in between time of waiting for a baby to be born...or a new teenage driver to come home.

We've experienced times of uncertainty in school or in our work.

Maybe we've had times when we've waited for grades to come out.

Or waited to hear back from a potential employer. A time when we've waited to hear back about a hoped-for promotion.

Or maybe we've experienced an in between time when we've had a major falling out with someone we care about. A time in between what the relationship was and what it will be. A time when we don't know if reconciliation will happen or not.

In all those in between times in our lives, Jesus meets us there. He meets us with healing and hope. He meets us there to bridge that gap and take us to what's next. Jesus is there to live with us in the uncertainty, and to lead us out.

The reading today ends with Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The people were waiting for this reign of God to come. They were in an in-between time. They knew life under Rome wasn't what God intended, and they were waiting for things to be set right.

They were waiting for all the trappings of kings – a royal procession, a coronation, for some the defeat and expulsion of Rome.

The kingdom of God did come into that liminal space...but people didn't recognize it. Instead of a powerful king, Jesus came. And the in between time of his arrival and the fulfillment of the kingdom is one we are still living in.

We are living in the time between the kingdom's coming and the final fulfillment of God's reign. We are living in this present world with all its pain and struggle.

We are right now collectively living in a time of turmoil and much that was familiar seems to be no more...but we don't really know what it will look like on the other side.

But that's exactly where Jesus meets us. In that in between time we get glimpses of that kingdom of God that Jesus said is already here among us. We experience those thin places...those places that are in between heaven and earth, where the distance is so narrow we can reach out and touch heaven.

Those thin places might be places in the natural world filled with majesty and grandeur. Or those joyful holy moments like the birth of a child or a wedding or a glorious special worship service on Christmas or Easter.

Those thin places can be a near miraculous healing or when someone practices compassion. Thin places are those places where relationships are restored and gratitude is practiced.

But this story tells us that those thin places can also be places of suffering and pain...even places that hover between life and death. Places where despair threatens...until we become aware that we are not alone and that Jesus has met us in the lowest place of our life.

Today we are baptizing little Travis Carlson.

In baptism, we are plunged into an in between place – a place between our birth into a world tangled by sin and our resurrection to new life. We are plunged into the place between Christ's death and Christ's resurrection.

In our baptisms Jesus meets us as the old self tarnished by sin is put to death so that we can walk wet in our new life.

The baptismal waters are truly a place where the evil of this world is defeated and the kingdom of God gains a new citizen.

Baptism is the entry point – the threshold – to a new way of life. In a little bit, we and Travis's parents and sponsors will make some promises about helping Travis learn to live in that new way.

Today's story gives a little glimpse of what that looks like. As we live in the in between we learn that prayer – that asking for help – is a part of that life. We learn that giving our thanks – like the one Samaritan leper – is a part of that life.

But most of all, we will share with Travis what Jesus promises – that he will never be alone in the in between and anxious times in his life. Jesus promises to meet him in those places. Jesus will come to him with healing and hope.

Travis will gain a community who can continue to remind him that Jesus loves him and walks with him, no matter what life may have in store for him.

And we hear again that same promise for ourselves – that Jesus meets us in our own liminal spaces...spaces of disorientation and unease...spaces of sorrow. Jesus meets us to bring healing, restoration, reconciliation. And in that most liminal space of all – death...even there Jesus meets us and raises us to new life.