

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy"), Associate to the Rector
12 February 2012

The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany (Year B)
Revised Common Lectionary
II Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-45

“Be Made Clean”

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The year is 1939. The Nazi regime is at the zenith of its power, and the west has not yet engaged the Second World War. With assistance from their Soviet allies, the German Army is pushing eastward into Poland.

Round about the first of September, German armored divisions encounter resistance at the Village of Krojanty. The Poles stand valiantly against their German adversaries. A Polish regiment would have numbered just under a thousand men, with well over a thousand horses on the field. But, all would be lost.

Poland's rifles could not hold out against German machine guns. Their horse-mounted cavalry could not overcome Germany's armor-plated vehicles. The Poles defended their homeland with the best tactics and finest technology of the previous war, but they were faced with an adversary whose power they could never have imagined.

In the years between the First and Second World Wars, the very nature of warfare changed forever. Poland was completely overwhelmed. They never stood a chance.

The story of Krojanty has been on my mind for the last several weeks, as our readings from St. Mark's Gospel have focused on Jesus' interaction with demons.

On the northwestern shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was slaying demons left and right. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” says one of the demons, “Have you come to destroy us?”¹

In short, Jesus had come to destroy the demons, and he does so with a single word. In the ancient war between good and evil – a war which began in the Garden of Eden – goodness finally has the upper hand. In Christ, ancient demons meet an all-powerful foe. In Christ, the very nature of spiritual warfare changes forever. In Christ, evil meets an enemy against which it cannot hope to stand.

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¹ Mark 1:24 (Epiphany 4B, RCL)

In today's Gospel reading, St. Mark makes no mention of demons, but they would have been on everyone's mind. In an age that knew nothing of medical science or psychiatric analysis, demonic possession explained any affliction that consumed the body or constrained the spirit.

When the leprous man asks Jesus to make him clean, he asks Jesus to remove from him that demon which was, quite literally, consuming his body from the inside out. Recall the exchange: The leprous man says to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus does not pause for a moment, "I do choose. Be made clean."

With six words – only two in the original Greek – the leper was cleansed immediately. The demon that once knew absolute victory is vanquished with a word. When it comes up against the embodiment of life, the embodiment of death can make no reply. The demon can mount no defense.

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The significance of this healing cannot be understated. Jewish law prescribes an elaborate, three-step, week-long process for the cleansing of a leper:²

Step 1: Have a priest slaughter a bird over fresh water in an earthen vessel and sprinkle the blood over the leper seven times.

Step 2: Have the leper wash his clothes, shave his hair, and bathe in water. Repeat seven days later.

Step 3: Make an offering of lamb, grain, and oil. Sprinkle some of the oil on the ground seven times, and burn everything else before the Lord.

Like a chef with her recipes, like a builder with his blueprints, the priest must follow the instructions exactly if he hopes to achieve success.

But, Jesus proves that he needs not follow anyone's instructions. Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus has the authority to exercise God's power over the forces of evil. And, with two short sentences, Jesus does just that: "I do choose. Be made clean."

With Jesus, there is no waiting, no sacrifice, no delay. The Lord is near. The Lord is near, and in his presence, ancient demons meet an all-powerful foe. They are vanquished in a word. They never stood a chance.

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Our Old Testament lesson this morning comes from the Second Book of the Kings, and prefigures what will happen almost a thousand years later in the Gospel.

Naaman was the commander the army of Aram, a country in present-day Syria. Naaman enjoys in his country the same popularity that General George Washington, General George Patton, and

² Paraphrase: Leviticus 14:1-20

General David Petraeus have enjoyed in ours. But Naaman has a problem: He has leprosy, and it is literally consuming his body from the inside out.

Long story short, Naaman learns that his only hope of a cure is to present himself to Elisha, a prophet and priest in Israel, a country he had only just recently conquered for Aram.³ It is as though George Washington is being directed to kneel before a British bishop in 1780, George Patton before a German priest in 1946, David Petraeus before an Afghani cleric in 2009.

Remarkably, Naaman swallows his pride. He assembles a great cavalcade, and marches himself to door of Elisha's house. Expecting to be cleansed in the ritual way, Naaman is shocked when Elisha asks him only to bathe seven times in the Jordan. Elisha's prescription seems so simple, that Naaman suspects trickery. Are his old enemies trying to humiliate him by having him splash around in the muddy Jordan? When Naaman finally does bathe in the river, the Scripture tells us that his skin "[is] restored like the skin of a young boy, and he [is] made clean."

There is nothing magical about the River Jordan *per se*. Three weeks ago, I put my very own hands into it, and was not cured even of a hangnail. That said, the Jordan is one of those places whereat God repeatedly drew near to his people, and in that way it is profoundly sacred.

When God draws near, all bets are off. In person of his prophet, God draws near to Naaman, and cleanses him immediately. In the person of his Christ, God draws near to St. Mark's leprous man, and cleanses him immediately. God draws near, and when he does the powers of evil fall flat on their faces. In God, the ancient army of demons – which once held absolute sway! – encounters an all-powerful foe, against which it cannot stand.

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In the twenty-first century, demons look different than they did in Biblical times, but they are no less real. Today's demons attack our spirits, not our bodies. They take the form of paralyzing emotions like fear, doubt, and self-loathing. Demons separate us from the love of God, rendering us unable to face the future, unable to trust, unable to love, unable to see God's beauty reflected in ourselves. Our twenty-first century demons may look different, but they can still consume us from the inside out. They can still destroy our faith.

Yet, the message of the Scriptures is this: When God draws near, no demon can stand. When God speaks, no demon can make reply. God is, and will always be, the powerful adversary that brings evil to its knees.

The leprous man said to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus did so choose, and his cleansing came to pass. Jesus will do the same for us, each and every time we ask, but only if we will allow his voice to echo through the depths of our souls, penetrating the deepest parts of our reality: "I do choose. Be made clean."

Amen.

³ This summary omits many important details in the interest of brevity. Most importantly, Naaman first presents himself to the King of Israel who is furious, and exclaims: "Am I God, to give life and death?" It is the King who first acknowledges that only God has power over this sort of disease. Cf., II Kings 5:7-9.