

THE FAITHFUL THANKSGIVING FOR SALVATION
Luke 17:11-19; Thanksgiving; November 25-26, 2020

There are two sets of Scripture Readings, both appropriate for the celebration of Thanksgiving Day, one using the theme of “Harvest Observance” and the other “Day of Thanksgiving.” With ours being a farming community with the harvest just having been brought in, our thoughts rise to God who continues to provide for our physical needs. We are thankful to God for caring for us and for those who have brought in the harvest. On the other hand, the Gospel of the ten lepers cleansed by Jesus, especially the one who returned to give thanks, also has a bearing on our thanksgiving in the midst of this world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. I will focus today on the Luke 17 healing of the lepers.

We read the Bible as God’s Word and the final authority in our lives. And for doing this, some people might put us down as backward and unscientific. It is true that the Bible is not a science text book and its purpose is to reveal to us the story of God and man, how God has saved us in Jesus. But, especially in the Old Testament laws for Israel living together, we notice that God’s civil laws for His people take into account what we now see as scientific realities.

For example, infectious diseases have been around ever since man fell into sin, so in Leviticus chapters 13-14, God gave laws that separated those infected with leprosy from the healthy population. Those with confirmed cases of leprosy were “quarantined” until healthy again. Thousands of years before microbiologists discovered infectious viruses and harmful bacteria (as if something is not real unless science declares it real), God took them into account. Those with leprosy were isolated from the healthy population until they were healed and declared clean.

Those of us who have had to isolate and quarantine because of COVID can begin to understand what it must have been like for those ten lepers in our Gospel. They were separated from their families and communities, unable to participate in everyday activities, but their isolation could last for months, years, and possibly for the rest of their lives and until they died. My experience was nothing compared to theirs.

Hearing that Jesus was able to heal diseases, in hope they **stood at a distance** (“physical distancing” was not invented by modern medicine) **and lifted up their voices, 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 cleansed.** The priests would declare that they no longer had an infectious disease and could return to their homes and families, work their jobs, and participate fully in their communities. They were set free from their quarantine; those who are no longer infectious are no longer a threat to infect anyone. They could all get on with their lives again, but before doing that, one of them needed to do something else first.

Then one of [the lepers], when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving Him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” **And He said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you.”**

You might have noticed that I changed the wording from Jesus saying to the one healed leper, **“Your faith has made you well,”** to **“Your faith has saved you.”** St. Luke was a physician and careful with his language. He noted that the ten were **“cleansed”** of their leprosy on their way, their uncleanness that quarantined them from the holy people of God. When the one saw that he was **“healed”** (Luke used a word to describe a return to physical health), he turned around. Then Jesus said that the one who returned was **“saved,”** not “made well.” The ten were cleansed by Jesus, the one saw that he was healed and returned to give thanks, and Jesus said that he was saved by faith.

Now, some translators might argue that the general word for “saved” that Luke used here means in this context that Jesus healed or made the man well. That is true, but the one Samaritan leper was praising God and on his face before Jesus thanking Him because he had saving faith. Not only was his body cleansed and healed from leprosy, but both his body and soul had been healed and cleansed from sin and unbelief. The man was saved by Jesus to live forever. Jesus said to him, **“Rise,”** the same word that describes Jesus’ resurrection from death.

What can we learn from this one who was cleansed, healed, and saved by Jesus, especially in contrast to the other nine who were also cleansed and healed but did not return to give praise to God in Christ?

The nine who were cleansed were thankful, I'm sure, but they saw their cleansing in terms of being able to go back to their lives as they used to be, life as it normally is. When they were in trouble, they were eager to cry out to God in Christ for help, but once cleansed, they couldn't get back to "normal" life quickly enough.

I get the sense that this world-wide pandemic we are in has caused more people to ask what God is up in this. Maybe more people are praying to God for protection and healing. I don't know, and it's hard to tell when so many of us are isolated because of infection or self-quarantining for safety from it. It is good and right that people should cry out to God for help in their times of need. If God is doing anything through this pandemic it is to call us to repentance for our sins, so we should cry out for His mercy and salvation in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, those with faith in God will not look at this latest disease as something "unfair," especially if they get it, or someone else they love does and even dies from it. If we want God to "fair" with us, we should all get sick and die. And when this most recent of new diseases that proceeds from the old sin of Adam in us is overcome and we consider it safe to go on with life again, will people return to the "normal" of life apart from God, or will they return to praise and thank God for their salvation?

Something that Christians are reminded of about our current suffering is that our praise and thanksgiving do not depend on whether or not we are healed from or avoid getting COVID-19. No matter what happens to us or others, even death, we have the Word of Jesus, "**Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you.**" We have been cleaned of our sins so we can gather in God's house as His holy people. We have been healed by Jesus and saved. We return to Jesus, even in the midst of our ongoing suffering, to give praise to our Savior and fall on our faces to thank Him because He will come to raise us from the dead to live forever in bodies that will be free from infection and sin. Our faith is in Jesus, now and forever. **Oh, give thanks unto the LORD for He is good, and His mercy endures forever!** Amen.