



FIRST LESSON

**2 KINGS 5:1-14**

PSALM

**PSALM 30**

SECOND LESSON

**1<sup>ST</sup> CORINTHIANS 9:4-27**

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. MARK 1:29-39**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY AND EVER-LIVING  
GOD, WITH MERCY YOU  
LOOK UPON OUR  
WEAKNESSES. STRETCH OUT  
YOUR WONDROUS HAND TO  
PROTECT US FROM DANGER  
AND RESTORE US TO HEALTH,  
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR  
SAVIOR AND LORD. AMEN.**

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## Liturgical Day: The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Date: February 15, 2009

Sermon Title: A Dangerous Jesus

if you choose: cleanse me;  
be made clean, but say nothing;  
hardly possible...

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let me start by asking a question of you all: "What influence does your faith have on your life?" Or, to be more specific, let me ask it this way: "Does your faith tend to protect you from the dangers of this world, or does it tend to make life more dangerous for you?"

In reality, there is some truth on both ends of that spectrum. On the one hand, our faith does call us away from self-destructive behavior, and from following the whims of our darker nature. But on the other hand, our faith calls us to throw ourselves into situations that a more reasoned approach would avoid; it calls us to offer ourselves in ministry where others might be reluctant to become involved.

That said, my guess is that more Christians would identify with the first half of this spectrum than the second. For most people, their faith calls them into religious practices or moral stands that keep the believer safe; practices that protect them from the dangers of this world. That can be observed in very simple ways. For instance, it could reasonably be concluded that Christian faith calls us to abstain from illegal drug use. If we follow that call, we'll be less likely to suffer from the negative aspects of drug use, we'll be less likely to be shot in a drug deal gone bad, and we'll be less likely to hang around with the kinds of people who bring trouble with them into every situation. That can also be observed in sublime ways. I've always been intrigued by the fact that the faith of ancient Israel prohibited them from eating pork. That was centuries before scientists discovered the negative effect that undercooked pork can have on people. Their religious practice of staying away from pork kept these ancient ancestors of ours safe from those negative effects.

We see this in today's Gospel lesson, and in both the social and the religious practices of first century life. In those days, leprosy was a great danger to society. They understood very little about this disease – but they were aware that it was contagious, and they were aware of the devastating effects it could have on them. Consequently religious and social practices developed to safeguard those who were not afflicted with leprosy. Lepers were separated from the rest of society. They were required to live by themselves, outside of town. They also were required to cry out, "Unclean, unclean." as a warning to anyone who ever came near them. These expectations were written both into civil law and into religious teachings. And they worked: usually, the sound of that cry sent people scattering – nobody wanted to be near a leper.

For some people – for many people – religious practices protect them from the dangers of this world.

For others, faith calls them into the danger of this world. Think of the stories we've read in the Bible. David was a simple shepherd when God called him to become a leader in Israel. What followed was years of danger:



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God's work. Our hands.

fighting the giant Goliath, running for his life from King Saul, engaging in battle himself once he was king. Saul was a well-known religious official – well respected by first century Judeans – a religious man's religious man. But God claimed him on the road to Damascus, renamed him Paul, and led him from town to town, where he was often beaten up for his efforts to share the Gospel. Peter had steady work as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, until he and some of his colleagues were called to leave the safety of that vocation, and follow the Rabbi from Nazareth. They stayed faithful to Jesus, and most of them eventually died because of their efforts to spread the Gospel. As we reflect on these Biblical stories, we quickly realize that God's call didn't necessarily lead to safety and security. It often puts one at great risk.

Again, we see that played out in this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus continually puts himself at risk, to continue his ministry. He eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He reaches out to the sick and diseased. He even touches those with leprosy. That costs him no small amount. His reputation is sullied because of his associations with the down and out. Good religious people whisper about this Rabbi who hangs around with all the wrong kinds of people. His reputation as a man of God begins to suffer. Church leaders reject him because he speaks of a grace that is available to anyone. The Romans eventually participate in his death, because of the commotion he is causing in Jerusalem. Faithfulness for Jesus did not protect him from the dangers of this world. In fact, it made him even more vulnerable to those very dangers. He ended up on the cross – killed because of the ministry God entrusted to him.

It reminds me of the conversation Susan had with the Beavers, in one of the early scenes in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Many of you are familiar with these stories, I'm sure – fantasies that C. S. Lewis wove to invite us to explore what it means to live as a Christian. Susan and her siblings are in the house of the Beaver family on their very first visit to Narnia, and the following exchange takes place about Aslan, the lion who serves as a Christ-figure in the Narnia series:

*"Is – is he a man?" asked Lucy. "Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."*

The people in Narnia knew that to be in the presence of Aslan was not safe, but it was certainly good. We could say the same thing about being in the presence of Christ. Much as we might like to think that it is safe, it isn't. As a matter of fact, Jesus is a rather dangerous person. To spend time with him – to be touched by his message – to engage in the ministry that lies close to the center of his heart – is often a very dangerous thing to do. But it is a very good thing, and even though it might put one's life at risk, it is the only true way to live.

I've been talking with a number of pastors lately, about how their churches are doing, as the US economy struggles. It isn't news to note that charitable giving often drops during a recession. And you probably won't be surprised to hear that many churches are being careful these days – pulling back and making cautious plans, just in case things don't go well for them in the coming months. They will tell you that they are playing it safe. That they are trying not to take any unnecessary risks. And on the surface, that seems like a reasonable approach.

But what would have happened in this morning's Gospel if Jesus had played it safe? What would have happen if he had taken a reasonable approach? He would have stayed a good distance away from that leper. He would have protected his own health, and ensured that he would continue to have access to his listeners. And in the end, he would have missed the chance to transform the life of someone who was in deep pain and despair. He would have missed the chance to help that leper become reconnected with his life. He would have missed the chance to have that leper become a genuine and passionate support of Jesus and his ministries.

I'm glad that in these uncertain times, this congregation hasn't given up on being passionate and courageous followers of Jesus. In the midst of a recession, we have already sent more than \$11,000 to Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania this year – and we are planning on a major fund-raiser in May to gather in even more support for them. As they struggled with limited resources for ministry in 2009, your Leadership Teams made the decision to continue giving a tithe of all that we receive to the ELCA – continuing with that strong support as a reminder of how important it is to stay generous, even when times are tough.

I hope you'll do the same. I hope you'll feel called by Jesus into the uncertain future of your life. I hope you will take the risk of following him, even when others might not. I hope you will find the life and the excitement and the purpose that comes when we commit ourselves to God, and decide to remain faithful no matter what it costs. I hope you will continue to support the church and its ministries with all of the strength you can muster. As we do our very best, even in the midst of uncertain times – especially in the midst of uncertain times – we will discover the life that Jesus wants us to know.

Dear friends, loved by God, forgiven by Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, let us put behind us the measured and cautious approach of the unfaithful. Instead, let us give our all to the one who gave his all to us, that through us, the ministry of the church might thrive, and the world might see the presence of the one who calls us to faithfulness: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (February 15, 2009)

English Text: <sup>i</sup>

<sup>1:40</sup> A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." <sup>41</sup> Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" <sup>42</sup> Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. <sup>43</sup> After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, <sup>44</sup> saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." <sup>45</sup> But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. <sup>ii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>1:40</sup> Καὶ ῥηεται πρὸς αὐτὸν λεπρὸς παρακαλῶν αὐτὸν [καὶ γονυπετῶν] καὶ λέγων αὐτῷ τι ἂν θέλῃς δύνασαι με καθαρίσαι. <sup>41</sup> καὶ σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἐκτείνας τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ ἤψατο καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ θέλω, καθαρίσθητι <sup>42</sup> καὶ εὐθὺς ἀπήλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἡ λέπρα, καὶ ἐκαθαρίσθη. <sup>43</sup> καὶ ἐμβριμησάμενος αὐτῷ εὐθὺς ἐξέβαλεν αὐτὸν <sup>44</sup> καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ ῥα μηδενὶ μηδὲν εἴπῃς, ἀλλὰ παγε σεαυτὸν δείξον τῷ ἱερεὶ καὶ προσένεγκε περὶ τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ σου προσέταξεν Μωϋσῆς, εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς. <sup>45</sup> ὁ δὲ ἐξελθὼν ῥξατο κηρύσσειν πολλὰ καὶ διαφημίζειν τὸν λόγον, ὥστε μηκέτι αὐτὸν δύνασθαι φανερώς εἰς πόλιν εἰσελθεῖν, ἀλλ' ἔξω ἐπ' ἐρήμοις τόποις ἦν καὶ ῥχοντο πρὸς αὐτὸν πάντοθεν. <sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Mark 1:40-45, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Mark 1:40-45, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).