

## **EPIPHANY: A TIME TO PROCLAIM GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE**

**Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 12, 2012**

**2 Kings 5:1-14**

**Psalm 30**

**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

**Mark 1:40-45**

### **God's Mercies -- In Ways We Least Expect**

This week's Gospel text brings us to the conclusion of chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel — a chapter that has been the focus for all but one of the weeks during this Epiphany season. The chapter opens by inviting us to hear “the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1, *GNT*) and immediately summons us to witness God's glory as manifested in Jesus the Christ. Beginning with his baptism, we journey with Jesus as he calls the first disciples, casts out demons, and heals many people. What a power-packed chapter!

The text for this week, in which we read of Jesus healing a leper, is juxtaposed against the Old Testament lesson about the healing of Naaman, a Syrian military leader, also afflicted with leprosy. In the Gospel account, Jesus reaches out and touches the leper; in the Old Testament account, Elisha the prophet does not even meet with Naaman but, instead, instructs his servant to tell Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan River.

According to Mosaic Law, those with leprosy were required to wear torn clothes, live apart from others, and call out “Unclean, unclean!” (Leviticus 13:45, 46). Touching a leper made one unclean; thus Jesus' touching of the leper defied social convention. The leper approaches Jesus in faith, kneels at his feet, and begs for help, trusting that Jesus can make him clean.

Naaman, on the other hand, after having been rebuffed by the king of Israel, approaches the home of Elisha, desperately seeking a cure. He assumes his wealth will ensure being treated by the prophet in dramatic fashion. How shocked indeed he must have been when, after being convinced by his servants to do what the prophet had said, he emerged from the Jordan River to find himself cured and his skin “firm and healthy like that of a child” (2 Kings 5:14b, *GNT*). And, ironically, it was a child, an Israelite servant girl, who suggested at the outset that Naaman go to the prophet.

In the Gospel text, we see Jesus acting in a way that no one would have expected. In the Old Testament text, Naaman is cured in a way he least expected. Both accounts reveal a return to health by the power of God. Jesus comes to usher in the Kingdom of God and to manifest God's glory; Elisha demonstrates the power to heal is God's, not his. Both accounts point to God's all-encompassing love. The leper, an outcast, is welcomed,

touched, and healed by Jesus; Naaman, a foreigner according to an Israelite perspective, is, nonetheless, not excluded from the mercy of God.

Naaman was instructed by Elisha to “wash himself seven times in the Jordan River” (2 Kings 5:10b, *GNT*). In the Bible, the number seven symbolizes completeness or perfection. Not only was Naaman cured physically of his leprosy, but he was also made whole in the sense of being restored by God’s mercy. Later in the text he vows that he “will not offer sacrifices or burnt offerings to any god except the LORD” (2 Kings 5:17b, *GNT*).

As the Epiphany season draws to a close, we can affirm that we have seen Christ manifested through God’s Word. Both healing encounters show that God’s love and mercy reach out to us at unexpected times in unexpected ways. No one can determine how or even why any of us are chosen to be recipients of such overflowing grace. We are, however, reminded of this — no child of God is excluded from God’s love. Since God desires that all be made whole, let us be open to receive God’s “unexpected” mercies that are “fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise” (Lamentations 3:23, *GNT*).

*This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel who served, until retirement, on the staff of American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. Barbara continues as a valued consultant to ABS.*

+ + +

**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Hong Kong** - with thanks to God that the RCUV Bible has received widespread support from Chinese-speaking churches all over the world, and that this year the Society is publishing various editions using the RCUV text; and with prayers for resources to ensure the Society is able to print large quantities to meet demand, that individuals and churches are blessed by these new Scriptures, that Chinese parents will use them to pass on the Bible’s teachings to their children, and that the RCUV will continue the CUV’s legacy in blessing the next generation; also pray for the work in **Macau; Taiwan** - with thanks to God for the high demand for Scriptures and for these three projects: Today’s Hakka Bible, which will be published before Easter; the diglot edition of Today’s Taiwanese New Testament with Proverbs and Psalms, also due for publication this year, with work continuing on the Old Testament; and the Chinese Study Bible, which continues to progress well; and with prayers for these projects, that the Bible Society continues to improve the variety and quality of its print and digital publications, and that, for all those receiving a Bible, it will change their lives.

**Activity Corner:** “Care and Concern” Cards

Supplies needed: Bible; 8-1/2” x 11” construction paper; markers, crayons, pens or pencils; old magazines or used greeting cards; stickers or glitter (optional); scissors; glue or paste.

Read together Psalm 30 and encourage members of your household to talk about times when they experienced God's healing. Invite everyone to create "Care and Concern" cards by folding a sheet of construction paper in half and decorating the front of the card with drawings or pictures from old magazines or from the front half of used greeting cards. On the inside of the card, encourage everyone to copy a verse from Psalm 30, such as verse 2 or 4, and to write a short message of encouragement. Decorate the cards with stickers or glitter (optional). Gather the cards and deliver them to a local hospital, nursing home, or rehabilitation center.