

“Three Ways to Act During an Epidemic...
And a Fourth Character”

(2 Kings 5:1-27; Mark 1:40-45)

(Sixth Sunday After Epiphany)

The narrative is about an epidemic of leprosy. Leprosy assaults your body as your skin rots away. But leprosy also attacks your social network, brings isolation, makes unclean, and leaves socially unacceptable.

I.

I want to talk with you about the ways you can participate in an epidemic. In this case it is an epidemic of leprosy. But it could be any number of epidemics:

- It could be HIV/AIDS that sweeps Africa;
- It could be Asian flu that now threatens to assault Turkey;
- It could be consumerism and the mad pursuit of commodities that moves the global economy;
- It could be American military imperialism that mocks justice and the rule of law;
- It could be the surging of anger among us that runs from road rage to capital punishment and a readiness to “nuke” the others;
- It could be an epidemic of dumbing down, the avoidance of books and newspapers, when any of a hundred books would have told us not to go to Iraq;
- It could be narcissistic entitlement with a very loud, public, “Can you hear me now?”

Any one of these epidemics eventually threatens our bodies with anxiety and threatens the body politic with collapse. And you get to decide how to participate. Our case study is one of leprosy; but it could be any of these epidemics.

II.

You could participate in an epidemic by being the one who is infected with the disease. Consider the man in our narrative. He is a Syrian general, politically active and socially connected in Damascus, like the Colin Powell of Syria... a lot of medals, and parties and receptions and press conferences. Big time! His wife sits at the dressing table getting ready for a royal banquet. He stands behind her, looks at her in the mirror. She looks up at him and smiles, and says, "What is that speck at the edge of your nose?" He picks at it and says, "Oh, it's nothing": But he wonders. After the dinner he comes home and looks again in the mirror. And now he is alarmed. He is a great warrior...he has leprosy! He winces and she weeps.

Because leprosy is no respecter of persons. And then he lines out the progress of the disease. He can keep it hidden for a while. But soon or late, they will know. And when they know, he will be shunned, no more dinner parties, no more TV appearances, no more influence, no more importance...broken, isolated, not permitted anymore in the temple, because he is ritually unclean and socially unacceptable. He is broken and reduced to tears.

But.... give him this.... he does not engage in denials. He does some research, talks to people, pushes into his internet and learns that he must go to the best people in Samaria, people in the hated enemy, Israel. It is a bitter pill to think that his enemy has his remedy. But he goes. He submits to the reality of his deathliness. He goes, like an

important general, a full entourage, much silver, much gold, many changes of clothes. He makes it a great procession, because he is a big guy, and big Syrian guys, if they must go to Israel, go in style.

He goes to Samaria and asks for a royal appointment. The king in Samaria thinks the general is on a diplomatic mission. But the general says to the king: "I have leprosy, heal me." The Israelite king is appalled because he is no emergency room assistant and sends him away.

But the general is determined. He is a man of action and resolve. And so, with the urging of his alarmed and wise advisors, he submits himself to this nobody, this Elisha, this uncredentialed guy who indifferently says to the great general, "Take two aspirins and jump into the Jordan River in the morning." It is a humiliation! But the general does it, because he wants his life back. He will do anything to veto the epidemic and renew his happy, satisfying life. He jumps, with great disdain and dread, into the Jordan.

And he comes up clean! His leprosy has vanished. We are told, "His flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy and he was clean..." safe, recovered, free of disease, sure to be welcomed home. He is so happy and so grateful. He knows that the healing has come in ways he could not control. He gladly asserts, "Now I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." He offers to pay, generously, and then he is on his way rejoicing. He is impressive...he does not deny, he runs risks, he accepts humiliation, he submits, he is grateful, generous, buoyant, with new skin like that of a baby, on the way home to well-being and restored power. He was on a sharp learning curve, but he learned. He learned that his life was a gift that he could not have on his own terms. You might be like that amid an epidemic, a person with good follow-through.

III.

But perhaps you do not have the disease. Maybe you are a bystander who serves as a truth-teller. So here is a second role you could play when you become aware of the epidemic. In verses 2-3, there is mention of a young slave girl. She had been captured by the Syrians in war and brought back home to Damascus to be a minder for the general's wife. It was not such a bad life except, of course, she was a captive prisoner. She accepted her assignment, worked around the house, in the bedroom. Like all such domestic slaves, she saw and heard and knew everything. She was in the bedroom that first night when the wife had said to the general, "What is that speck at the edge of your nose?" The girl looked up and waited for his answer. She moved quietly, did not say anything, but understood immediately that big trouble was coming to her household.

After the general left the room as his wife lingered, the young girl stood at the shoulder of her mistress. After the general had asked around and looked on the web, the young girl gave the best advice, the advice they eventually heeded. She said,

If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure
him of leprosy (v. 3).

That is all she said. So far as we know, that is all she said in all of human history. Those are her only words and then she is done, never to appear again, never mentioned, never remembered. But she did say that much. She said it, because in her previous life and before this one, she had grown up in Northern Israel. She knew at that time the local gossip. She had heard of the prophet who was in Samaria, this strange Elisha, this man who raised the dead and fed the hungry, this man so filled with spirit and popular support that he drove the king crazy. The young woman remembered where she came from. She

had not been talked out of her rootage or her identity by her new life in Damascus. She did not know much theology, but he was like the Prodigal Son. She remembered that back there, there was healing. She had no doubt that this strange guy in Israel, without respect and without credentials, is a God-given antidote to the deathly epidemic. She spoke her little truth. And it was enough! It turned the narrative. It turned the life of the general. For all we know, it turned the history of the world, because she has not forgotten the little truth entrusted to her, that there is healing!

IV.

Well, you may not be the guy with the disease. You may not be the little girl with the truth that changed the world. There is a third role you can play amid the epidemic. When the general had been healed, he offered to pay Elisha. And Elisha refused: “As the Lord lives whom I serve, I will accept nothing.” And the general left. But also in the room on that day was Gehazi, Elisha’s aide and associate, always in the room with him.

After the general left the room and hurried back toward Damascus, Gehazi quietly left the room and ran out into the road in pursuit of the general. The general, still ebullient with health, greeted him. Gehazi told him that two folk had joined the prophet and were without resources; please give me some silver and some of your fine clothes for them. The general, still grateful, gladly gave him money and clothes. Gehazi took the stuff back to his room.

Elisha meets him on his return and questions him, because he knows what Gehazi has done. He has scammed the general in his well-being and has given him a shakedown. He has turned wondrous healing into an occasion for profit. He has drawn the mystery of healing into the economy of gain and exploitation. He has distorted the gift of grace

because he saw an advantage for himself and took it. This is a third role you can play in an epidemic. You can see an edge, an advantage, a chance to advance yourself and turn a human transaction into entitlement and promotion and success. You can refuse to recognize the inscrutable workings of the mystery of healing and imagine that the whole design is for you and your benefit. The prophet who sees all of this not only rebukes his exploiting associate:

Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? (v. 26)

Is this a time for seeking advantage at the expense of the gift of healing? Before he finishes, Elisha curses Gehazi and fates him to leprosy...the leprosy of the general. This greedy sense of self has drawn Gehazi into the epidemic.

V.

Well, you get to choose in the midst of the epidemic of leprosy or AIDS or imperialism or consumerism, or narcissism or rage or death, an epidemic that is all around us and that concerns us all:

- You can be the one with the disease; you can cease denial, submit, and be grateful for healing;
- You can be the young woman who remembered her identity and spoke her truth that countered the disease;
- You can be like Gehazi, a hustler who uses the pathology all around him for career advancement.

You can choose a role, or you can try them on one at a time, or you can play them all.

VI.

But I have not yet mentioned the Fourth Character, the lead character in the narrative. After the general and the young woman and the hustling aide, there is this prophet in Israel. He is a mysterious, hidden, inaccessible figure. He is almost beyond approach. He is unimpressed with the general, for the general arrives at his house with a great military clatter. But he does not come to the door to greet him, because such worldly achievement and bravado do not impress him at all. He sends a practical nurse to the door with a prescription:

Go wash in the Jordan seven times, your flesh will be restored and you will be clean (v. 10).

That is all. Elisha knows the mystery of healing. He points beyond himself to the God of Israel, the lord of the exodus, the creator of heaven and earth. He knows that there are healing juices at work in the world that are not administered by the rulers of this age. He knows that the God of Israel is capable of countering our pathologies with a ritual activity of submission and gratitude, of distance from big time exhibitionism to small, humiliating submission. And he knows that the surging spirit of God swirls around his own person to make all things new.

The story is about this Fourth Person in Israel, the one the little girl remembered, the one who is the antidote to deathly pathologies that are all around us in successful, dominant society. Of course, it is not different in the New Testament lesson concerning Jesus. The early church knew the Elisha story, and they retold it about Jesus, because they have seen the same quality of inscrutable healing in Jesus who is unimpressed by the power games and credentials and career paths of Syrian generals. A leper came to him.

Jesus...moved we are told by pity...healed him, and sent him to the priest for the proper ritual of rehabilitation.

That is all we are told, except Mark reports, right at the very beginning of the Gospel story, that he could not go into a town openly. He could not go in because the authorities had already begun to watch him. The authorities have a stake in keeping the epidemic going. They do not want healing, and they clearly do not want uncredentialed healing by a spirit-filled nobody. But the people in the country surged around him. They sensed in him a gift of God, a surge of the spirit, a trace of life in our body of death. They watched and saw newness that moved the world out of its deathliness.

So you go on living amid the epidemic:

You may be a carrier of the epidemic;

You might be a little truth-teller who knows about healing;

You might be a con man or woman, out to get ahead.

Either way, it's life in the epidemic. I am undecided whether this story is about our several roles in the epidemic, or about the Fourth Character, the one whom we Christians call Lord and Savior. I guess it is about both, *our roles* and *The Fourth Character* and keeping them connected to each other.

Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary

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