

Psalm 111

Praise the Lord!

I thank the Lord with all my heart
in the company of those who do right, in the congregation.

²The works of the Lord are magnificent;
they are treasured by all who desire them.

³God's deeds are majestic and glorious.
God's righteousness stands forever.

⁴God is famous for his wondrous works.
The Lord is full of mercy and compassion.

⁵God gives food to those who honor him.
God remembers his covenant forever.

⁶God proclaimed his powerful deeds to his people
and gave them what had belonged to other nations.

⁷God's handiwork is honesty and justice;
all God's rules are trustworthy—

⁸ they are established always and forever:
they are fulfilled with truth and right doing.

⁹God sent redemption for his people;
God commanded that his covenant last forever.
Holy and awesome is God's name!

¹⁰Fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins;
sure knowledge is for all who keep God's laws.
God's praise lasts forever!

Luke 17

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, ¹³ they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!"

¹⁴ When Jesus saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they left, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

It may not seem that important initially, but “on the way to Jerusalem” is a phrase that deserves our attention because Luke is focused on what happens in Jerusalem. The culmination of Luke’s theology happens in Jerusalem. Throughout practically the entire Gospel, Jesus is walking toward Jerusalem where he will die and he will rise. The world hinges, Luke believes, on this death and resurrection of Jesus that happens in Jerusalem. Whenever you encounter the Gospel of Luke, your ears should perk up every time you hear Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem because Luke’s tying the death and resurrection of Jesus to whatever details come next. It’s a scriptural signpost along the road of our reading that says *Pay Attention for Salvation Details*. That’s a bit too long for a sign, but in our digital age,

it might be a scroll on the bottom of the television or become the five second ad before you watch the next YouTube video.

“On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.” The first thing that we hear about this journey toward Jerusalem is that Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. This was the most direct route between Galilee and Jerusalem, through Samaria, but Jesus didn’t have to go to Jerusalem this way. In fact, most Jews would avoid this path altogether, crossing the Jordan river and adding many miles to an already long journey between Galilee and Jerusalem. Why do you think that is? Why is it that Jesus decided to go this way instead?

Well, to understand that, you’ve got to understand the politics of highways. Seriously. Highways are very political entities, not only because it takes tax money to build them,

but there are major political consequences to where and how highways get built and who gets to use them. The best example I know of is NC-147 in Durham, which connects I-85 on the north side of Durham with I-40 on the south. 147 cuts right through downtown with exits at Duke University, Duke Hospital, the Durham Bulls Athletic Park, and runs into the Research Triangle Park where untold sums of money go into medical science and technology research every year. To build a new highway through an old city, though, you've got to remove a number of buildings and displace a number of people. It probably won't shock you to know that the African American community was disproportionately affected by the construction of 147. This highway cut right through the heart of Durham's vibrant black cultural centers and the African American financial district, known up to that point as Black Wall Street because of the large amount of black business and wealth concentrated in the area now

gashed in two by 147. That not only displaced untold numbers of people from homes and businesses, but ruined the economic flow of the neighborhoods, causing further distress to an already marginalized community. What's the point of all this?

There's a reason they call highways like this a "bypass." They take you over top of neighborhoods at rapid speed. They help you avoid getting to know the landscape and architecture of a space. They help you to avoid interacting with the people so that you almost never have to come face to face with the people that aren't like you. That's the legacy of 147 in Durham, and in a different way, that's the legacy of Jews who would avoid walking through Samaria at all costs. We often build roads not only to help us travel, but to help us avoid people we don't want to deal with. If you take the bypass, you never have to follow Jesus along

the border of Samaria and Galilee because you're taken right over top of it.

Where are the Samaritans that you refuse to go? The other side of the tracks? The wrong side of town? And what precisely do we mean by those phrases, anyway? What highways do we travel on that were built so we could avoid contact with a community and were built in a way that hurt that community? I bet Jesus is there. And I'd bet he's hanging with the societal lepers, too.

When we hear that Jesus entered a village and was immediately approached by ten lepers, there's some subtext there that isn't obvious to us. It's possible the entire town is a leper colony, or if not, that there's a home for people with leprosy on the outskirts of the town. Either way, the unique thing about these communes of lepers is that you'd find both Jews and Samaritans living together. Jews normally believed that contact with Samaritans made them

unclean, but when a Jew contracted leprosy, they became ritually unclean as well. Ritually unclean meant that you couldn't enter the temple, and because it was something that passed by contact to other people, it meant that you couldn't hang out with anybody, not even your family, until you were considered clean once again. The social oddity of the leper colony was that there were no social classes. Jews people no longer saw a necessary division between themselves and the Samaritans, for their shared leprosy meant they were all in the same state of uncleanness, that in their shared struggle, they were the same. In this illness, oddly enough, Jews and Samaritans found an equality, an ability to not just live with one another, but to care for one another. This entire racial division fell to pieces when they recognized their common plight.

Who are the people that we refuse to associate with because their presence makes us feel dirty? Who are the

people that seem so different than you that you'd swear out loud that they're nothing like you? Or, who the people that are so much like you that they annoy you to pieces?

Because, you see, that's another historical oddity about the difference between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were the poorer cousins of the Jews. These racial groups shared common ancestors, and in fact, common Israelite ancestors. When Babylon conquered Israel around 587 BCE, the conquering nation took all of the wealthy, all of the skilled artisans, all of the academics, all of the politicians – anyone with significant social power – to Babylon. During this exile, they married almost exclusively within the tribe, so Jews only ever married Jews. These people and their middle and upper class descendants were later allowed to return to Israel, something you can read about that in Ezra and Nehemiah. Samaritans, on the other hand, were the poorer or less politically significant people who were left behind in

Israel after Babylon defeated them. To survive, they married with Gentiles, which just means people who weren't Jewish, but they continued the practice of worshipping only one God and keeping much of the Law that Jews practiced. They become called Samaritans because they were highly concentrated in the northern part of Israel in a the region called, you guessed it, Samaria. Though they were mostly the same, Jews saw Samaritans as unclean because they married and had frequent contact with people that weren't direct descendants of Jacob.

So we've got this commercial before us, telling us to pay attention for details about salvation. We've got a group of people who would otherwise never spend time together living with one another because they share a disease.

We've got a vision of healing for all those who seek God's grace. And then we've only got one person, a Samaritan, who comes to Jesus to offer thankfulness for his healing.

We've got the signpost – Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem – so where in that matrix are we supposed to see salvation?

What if we're supposed to see an image of salvation in the leper colony, even before the healing,? What if salvation begins with our common humanity, in those places where we acknowledge our bodies and our pain and our need for one another and that those things outweigh our religious idolatry? What if heaven looks like a leper colony where everyone admits that they're equally in need of God and equally in need of one another rather than the religious structures that we've built that try to separate sacred from profane, that keep holy from common?

Because Jesus comes to that town, to that colony. Jesus shows up there, and not anywhere else. Jesus doesn't take the highway that carries him over top of the community's problems, but walks right through them, with them, and confronts them. Jesus, the fullness of God in

person, is himself the totality of holiness and so Jesus names that place and those people holy. Jesus decides not only that Samaria is a place worth going through, but that this town, this place that lepers call home, is worth visiting. Even before the healing, this place was blessed, because Jesus revealed the sacred within the profane, that beauty within this community of Jews and Gentiles together was something worth showing up for. Salvation begins in the most unlikely of places, because Jesus sees the holiness even in the midst of our sicknesses and blesses it with his presence.

The story ends, though, with a bit of a sad trombone. In healing, the divisions return. Though we don't know the identities of every single one of those who received Jesus's healing, since this was a leper colony on the border between Jewish and Samaritan territory, we can know with practical certainty that there were some Jews and some

Samaritans. Yet, only one returns to thank Jesus, now fully healed, and once again completely alone: a Samaritan. For some reason, the only one who saw fit to return to Jesus's side was the one least likely to ever be by the side of a Jewish rabbi.

But, then again, maybe that's another very true signpost for our salvation. Jesus responds to all those who cry for his help, to all those who fall at his feet and plead for mercy. Jesus's willingness to say "yes" to our healing, to take our needs up himself, is surely a sign of salvation. The Kingdom of God is here! But we can also see that it's not complete because we see the reality that not all people will be truly thankful for the gifts of grace that they receive. We see that not all people will be willing to embrace the fullness of salvation that Christ opens to us if it means hanging out with that Samaritan again or taking that road through that neighborhood. Even though they suffered together, in their

redemption, the Jews amongst the healed have already left this Samaritan behind.

But Jesus is there, still there, always there. Jesus is pointing to the holiness in this person that the religious insiders refuse to love once again. Jesus is recognizing the faith and faithfulness of the one least likely to be seen as faithful by any other Jew. Rather than abandon him, Jesus commissions him as a new disciple: "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Where are the places where we're not willing to go? Where are the people that we refuse to be with? In all likelihood, that's where we will find Jesus, and that's where Jesus is looking to find us.