

*“On the way to Jerusalem,
Jesus was going through the
region between Samaria and
Galilee.”*

The Space Between **A Sermon on Luke 17:11-19**

Slide: Autumn Scene

What I love about the Bible is that it doesn't matter if it is the first time you have heard or read this miracle story of the ten who had leprosy or if it's the hundredth time, there is always something new that a person can learn about it. One might think that I would naturally go to the little lesson of the story about the one of the ten who turned to give thanks to Jesus for being healed, and I have done that - but, not today.

This week, when contemplating this Good News story, I noticed something new to me, something I never have noticed before: Jesus is traveling somewhere between Samaria and Galilee. I ever paid that much attention before to that first sentence of the Gospel reading which says:

So what, you might think? He's coming from somewhere and going to somewhere. How is that expository sentence supposed to be profound? I know, I travel from home to church a lot and nothing profound may happen in between, and really, I hope nothing happens in that five minutes of driving! But, when writing and compiling a book or story, even the Bible, the ones who knit these stories together to be read or heard in any sequence, would likely choose to write it in such a way that it hangs together for some theological or literary importance.

Therefore, perhaps the place IS important. Maybe we should pay attention to those things!

So, today we hear that Jesus is going to Jerusalem and we find him between Samaria and Galilee. I'm wondering if that is important. He isn't in Samaria, the land of mostly Gentiles; that is Samaritans, who are foreigners, and he's not in Galilee, the land of mostly Jews. He's somewhere

between. I'm wondering if there is something more to that and why the Gospel writer of Luke would want us to know.

I wonder if the Gospel writer would want us to know that these two nationalities used to be together, that before there were Samaritans and Jews, there was the Kingdom of Israel and Judah; that they all traversed the wilderness for 40 years together after the great plagues and Moses leading them across the Red Sea; that they claimed the same God of Jacob, who drank at the same common well, who were the same people who didn't listen to the prophets, and lastly were ripped apart to be separated in exile.

I wonder if they knew that the exile they experienced would change them so much, the Samaritans would be so influenced by the culture around them that they changed while the Jews clung to the purity codes that so defined them. I wonder if Luke would want us to know that. And, I wonder if Jesus does, too.

For, in this space between, these ones who have leprosy, Jew, Gentile, and Samaritan, they cling together in exile, isolated, reviled,

left alone, thought of as sinners because they have this dreaded disease, between the space of Samaria and Galilee, where they see Jesus and they cry: "Jesus, master, have mercy on us!" It is there in the space between, that they encounter the living God. I wonder if that's where we often are, too, the space between looking for Jesus to save and heal us.

Way back when I was in music school at Pacific Lutheran University, I had a good friend who I will call Mary. She played the piano just magically. Listening to her play, you would just simply know that that was what she was meant to do. She could play Beethoven divinely but also her musicality was beautiful. But, in her early 30's she began to have some pain in her forearms. At first, she thought it was a repetitive thing and went to physical therapy, but no good. Then one day, she woke up and she couldn't open her hands from a fist position. It took some stretching to get them to open.

After numerous tests, a Rheumatologist determined that she had a rare genetic inflammatory arthritis. After

medications she tried and therapy, she found that she could not play the piano as she once did. She lost her passion, her vocation, and a central component of her identity. And, as anyone who is diagnosed with anything life changing, she naturally went into a place of depression, loss, and grief. There she was at the space between, perhaps not like the lepers praying to get a glimpse of the living God to have mercy on her.

At our college choir reunion last year, as I asked her about her life, and as we swapped stories of living life with chronic disease, she told me that it was in that dark place where Christ met her and even though at first she could not see him, he helped her to see that she had an amazing gift to teach children, a gift she never would have seen if she was not so determined to do the only thing she thought she was good at.

Of course, she misses the piano and she naturally still grieves that loss. She would never say it was good to lose that ability and neither would I. It was and continues to be a huge loss for her, but she told me that because of that dark place, she became more compassionate, she could see

people in a new way and she has found new life in directing three children choirs near Phoenix, Arizona. She truly believed God had now lead her to see the other gifts she never knew she had.

In the goodness of all creation, when God created this beautiful universe, the space between was created along with it. We don't always notice it. Often we don't want it. And, sometimes it's miraculous! Look at the beautiful trees as they turn to colors we see but once a year, these transition spaces always occur from Summer to Autumn and then from Autumn to winter and then spring back to summer. We see beautiful babies born and we witness decay and death. We live with great joy and times of despair. We have elements of contentment but with that also come the disruptions of life.

Perhaps I see a something different than the author of Luke intended for me to see today...maybe. But, in all of the movement of scripture we see over and over that although God promises always to be present, we are especially witness to the fact that Christ comes most when we are at our deepest need. We may

not see it, experience it, and sometimes we refuse to, but it is there. And, here is why we know God is there because:

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Did you catch that in the first sentence of the reading for today?

“On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.”

On the way to Jerusalem – we are reminded that Jesus goes to die. His only real purpose for going to Jerusalem is to encounter his own space between – his own life to death moment. At the cross, Christ chooses to experience the depth of our experience: to feel abandoned, betrayed, isolated, a leper in need of healing and restoration. Christ sees us and has compassion enough to die for us.

But, here’s the Good News which we already know: Christ cannot be kept down by death. Even on the cross he stretches out his arms to heal us, to give us life and salvation through his destruction of death at the open tomb. Even and especially there at the cross, Christ draws the world to himself so that whatever

may happen to us, he will experience that with us – because he did and he chose to.

Today, you may be in the space between in your life. A healing station is available during the time of Holy Communion. Maybe you are not in a need for healing today, but sometime you will be. You are welcome at the healing station no matter what your challenges are. But, remember that these healing stories from the Bible are not there to tell you that your faith isn’t good enough to be well. And, they are not there to give you false hope. They are there to help you experience the Living Christ meeting you where you are and who longs to be in relationship with you. And, especially healing stories are there to remind you that:

If you grieve, Christ is with you.

If you can’t forgive, Christ is with you.

If you are depressed, Christ is with you.

If you are uncertain about direction, Christ is with you.

If you are sick, Christ is with you.

If you are afraid, Christ is with you.

If you are full of joy, Christ is with you.

And, if you are dying, Christ is with you.

Christ is with you because Christ was on his way to Jerusalem from a place somewhere between Samaria and Galilee. He went there for me. He went there for you. He went there for the sake of the world.

Slide: Prayer

Let us pray. God of life, we have been, are, or will be in pain – our own or that suffered on behalf of and with others. Grant us courage to name our griefs; help us be a community to support those in grief; and remind us that while grief is real, your promise of life is even more so. We ask all this in the name of your Son, who put death to death. Amen.