

A New Skin
Mark 1:40-45

My mother has a summer home in Oregon. One time she talked Becky and me into driving with her from Texas to her place in Oregon. It was a wonderful trip. At that time I hardly had been outside of this part of Texas. I saw terrain and landscapes that I never imagined. Somehow my mother didn't get around to telling me that at some point we would have to drive over the Grand Teton Mountain Range. I've told you before that I've got a problem with heights. All of a sudden I find myself in the back seat of an old SUV on a tiny, winding mountain road with absolutely nothing between us and a sheer drop of thousands of feet except a few inches of road. My mother was driving. I kept hearing her stomping on something. I asked her what she was stomping on, and she said, "Oh, nothing to worry about. The accelerator is sticking, and I'm stomping on it to get it loose." I felt a panic attack coming on. My ears started ringing. I was seeing spots. My fingers were going numb. I was desperately looking for some way to get out of that car and off the side of that mountain. I was trapped in the backseat of that SUV, with my elderly mother driving and the accelerator sticking. What was I to do? I was trapped, and there was no way out. Well, I did the only thing I could do—I lay down in the floor board and began praying. Prayer saved me. Without prayer, I would probably be suffering from Post Traumatic Distress Syndrome to this day.

There is nothing worse than the feeling of being trapped with no way out. People who feel trapped do desperate and crazy things. I read an interview yesterday in the newspaper of an army recruiter. This man was a career soldier in the army. He was talking about working twelve to fourteen hours a day seven days a week to meet his quota. When he failed to meet his quota, his superior officer would threaten to drum him out of the army, and this man could not imagine life outside the army. He said that he would fanaticize about having a car wreck, just so that he would have an honorable way of escaping the pressure and getting some rest. We can understand how gang members can live such foolish and self-destructive lives if we realize that they perceive themselves as trapped in a hopeless situation. People who feel trapped turn to destructive forms of escape, such as drugs and alcohol. They become angry and cynical. Or, worst of all, they just give up.

Scientists once did an experiment to see how this feeling of being trapped affects our stamina. They filled a kettle of water up to the point that he could almost reach the rim. The little rascal swam for hours before he became exhausted and they had to rescue him. A few days later they put the mouse in a half-filled kettle of water. The mouse swam for about half an hour and then it suddenly just quit swimming and started sinking before he was rescued. What was the difference? In the full kettle he was able to endure much longer. In the half-filled kettle he became exhausted in a matter of minutes. The difference was this: In the first kettle he could see a way out. In the second kettle he simply gave up, because he couldn't see a way out.

We've been talking about fresh starts. People who feel trapped desperately need a fresh start. We can endure anything, as long as we know there is a way out. No matter

how bad the situation, we can deal with it, as long as we know that the day will come when we can get a fresh start.

People of faith know that we are never hopeless and helpless. There is always something we can do. We can pray. We know that when we pray, God will hear us and will deliver us. God will provide a fresh start. There is always a doorway out, and prayer is the key that opens that door.

That's the message of this story of the leper.

In biblical times lepers didn't live very long. It wasn't the disease that killed them. It was hopelessness. When a person was diagnosed with leprosy, he knew he was probably doomed to live out the rest of his life in quarantine.

Now to be sure it was an upside down kind of quarantine. When we quarantine someone, we put them in a room and keep everybody else out. That's hard enough. It's hard to be locked up in a room and shut off from people.

Once upon a time hospitals kept what was called a pastors' list. This was a list of all the patients in the hospital and their religious affiliation. Pastors could look at the list and see if they had any members in the hospital they hadn't heard about. I was checking the pastors' list one day and saw where someone I didn't know had listed himself as a member of my church. I went up to visit this man and offer him some spiritual support. I found a forty-year-old man who was pleasant and gregarious. He thanked me for coming. He told me that although he hadn't been in church in many years, he was grateful that his pastor would come see him, in spite of his inactivity. After visiting a few minutes, he said, "You're a brave man." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "I'm in quarantine. I have infectious hepatitis." As I began slowly backed away from him, I mumbled something about having faith in God. The truth is that I wasn't paying attention when I went in, and I missed the sign on the door saying, "No admittance without surgical mask, gown and gloves." He said, "You know, it's good to actually see a face. I haven't seen anybody's face since they put me in here a couple of weeks ago. It's funny how much you can miss something like seeing people's faces."

Being quarantined to a room where you are cut off from people is hard. But lepers were quarantined, not by being isolated inside a room, but by being put outside--outside of society. They could see other people's faces from a distance, but no one was allowed to see their faces. When anyone moved in their direction, they had to hold their hands over their nose and mouth and shout, "Unclean," --in other words, "Stay away."

So, they lived out in the open, cut off from family and friends, with no way to support themselves, begging and scrounging for food.

This was the way they would probably live for the rest of their lives. Biblical leprosy was really several different skin diseases. Some of them were not permanent diseases. But most were, and the people of that time didn't know the difference between them. So, most lepers assumed that they would never be allowed to return to society. They would give up and die. They couldn't see a way out.

But Mark tells us about this leper who refused to give up. He refused to believe there was no way out. He was looking for an answer. He believed there was a solution.

A strange thing about human nature is that you see what you are looking for. You usually won't find a solution to a problem until you are looking for one. If you don't believe there is a solution, you won't see it even if it slaps you up beside the head. If you're looking for a solution, you are much more likely to find one.

This man was looking for a solution. And he found it. He heard about Jesus. Jesus was going about the countryside healing sick people. The leper was certain that Jesus could heal him too. He went looking for him. When he found him, he knelt down before Jesus and offered up a simple prayer of petition, "If you are willing, you can cleanse me." Jesus touched him and said, "I am willing. Be clean!"

The man was healed. The leprosy was gone. His skin was as clean and healthy as a new-born baby's. He had a new skin. And he had a new life.

After he went to the priest to have his healing certified, he was able to return to his family and his friends. But he didn't just return to his old life. He got a new life. He had a new appreciation for all the things he had once taken for granted—the touch of his children, talking with his wife, sharing a meal with his parents and his aunts and uncles and cousins, having food and shelter. His life was better, happier and more complete than it had been before he became sick. It was a new life. He got a fresh start.

Let me ask you, are you unhappy about something in your life? Is it something that you don't expect to get any better?

Don't give up. Pray about it. As long as we can pray, we should never feel trapped. There is no such thing as a hopeless situation for Christians.

1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

For every problem God has a solution. We need to pray and ask that Christ will show us the solution. Then we need to start watching for it. Remember, if you aren't looking for it, you probably won't see it, even if it runs over you.

There are many ways Christ can deliver us from our trials.

It may be that Christ will change our circumstances, as he did with the leper.

It may be that Christ will enable to change our own circumstances. Often we are not really trapped. We just lack the courage to do what we need to do to change our circumstances. Christ can give us that courage.

It may be that Christ will give us a new outlook on our circumstances. I know that Christ is past. But let's think about the Christmas movie, "It's a Wonderful Life." Here is a man who feels trapped in his little town. Although he longs to see the world, he never leaves Bedford Falls. He is trapped. First, he is trapped by an obligation to his dead father. Then he is trapped by falling in love with a young woman. Then he is trapped by his responsibilities to his family and the people of the town. Finally he is in danger of literally being trapped in jail because of the dishonesty of another man. He finally gives in to despair and is ready to end it all. But before he does he is given the opportunity to see how much poorer the world would be without him. When he goes back home, his circumstance haven't changed, but his outlook has changed. He no longer feels trapped by his life. He sees he has a wonderful life.

There is always a way out of any trial. We can get a fresh start. All we have to do is ask. Christ will show us the way.

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