

Her day began in the middle of the night, while the moon was still bright, long before its glow would succumb to the blinding light of the Middle Eastern desert sun. Rising from her bed roll with the intention of finally leaving the house was a welcome relief from the restless anxiety of insomnia. How could she risk the sweet release that came with sleep when it meant she might not awaken in time to make it to her destination the next day? The walk would have taken a normal person less than a few hours. But, she was not a normal person. She was a person whose body was covered in red, mean, seeping rashes. The rash had started on her neck and now, much to her shame, covered her face. Recently, it had spread down her body, down, down even to her feet. Every step took courage because with the steps came the pain.

The village healer, a wizened lady who lived a few houses over, gave her a salve when her skin had started to itch. It helped a little with the pain and it smelled nice, but it did nothing to curb the spread of the rough, red, seeping sores.

The priest suggested she make atonement for the sin that was causing her disease. She knew she wasn't perfect but what sin could she have possibly committed to deserve this suffering. Her shortcomings seemed to be no more or no less than most other persons'. And, even if she sought to atone, there was no way her family could afford a ram to sacrifice at the altar. There was barely enough grain to feed the family, let alone to keep any livestock.

She was sinking down, down, down in her suffering . . . her friends rejected her, the other women at the well looked the other way and murmured among themselves anytime she drew near, and she knew that she was a burden on her parents and siblings—she wasn't even able to work anymore. As the rash grew, so did her despair, and she started to feel like there was no hope, no way out, no escape from this painful, humiliating, and shameful hell she was living.

But a couple of days earlier, the healer had come to visit her again, with a gentle smile on her face, to tell her the news of a man, a man from Nazareth. Pstt, what good can come of Nazareth, she wondered. And yet people in the next village over told her the man called Jesus of Nazareth had healed someone with a disease just like hers. The healer's sister-in-law had seen it with her own eyes—the man Jesus just stretched out his hand, touched the man with the rashes, and he was healed. As she was telling the story, someone else came over and told another remarkable tale about the man named Jesus.

There was a fellow, a Galilean, who had been paralyzed for years. His friends took him to see the man Jesus, the one with the healing powers. When the house Jesus was staying in was too crowded to carry their friend through the door, they climbed onto the roof, carrying their friend on his mat between them, and, using a rigged up system of make-shift pulleys, they lowered their friend down through the roof. Imagine that! Just took the tiles right off, made a hole in the ceiling, and lowered him right down into the middle of the room! When his mat rested securely on the floor, Jesus said to him, "I say to you, stand up . . ." And he did! That man, right there in front of the room full of people, stood right up off that filthy mat he'd been laying on for years, rolled up the mat, and walked right out of that place, his friends following with looks of amazed gratitude on their faces!

Hearing these stories made it clear to her that the man Jesus was her last hope. Every step of the journey to get to where they said he was going would be slow and painful, but she would get there. She had to get there. And so she walked out her door in the middle of the night, heedless of the dangers that lurk in the dark, and took the first step into what she hoped would be a better future.

It wasn't long before she began to see others on the road. The sun still hadn't risen in the east and yet the roads were becoming almost crowded with people like her—people with painful looking sores, people being pulled along in carts because they couldn't walk, people who were blind clasping the elbows of others on the road—all of them on a pilgrimage to get to the man named Jesus, the man who might be able to heal them, the man who was their last hope.

And finally, they arrived—along with a great multitude of others—coming from the east, the north, the south, the west, all of them flooding onto a large open plain. Some leaned on the boulders that had rolled into the space generations ago. Others set up small tents to protect themselves from the heat of the sun. People—so, so many people. She had never seen so many people. People whose accents and clothing revealed that they, too, had traveled a long way. All these people had come for the same reason she had, to be healed of their disease, to rid their troubled souls of the anxiety and despair that filled them.

She found a place next to a scrubby bush to sit down. It felt so good to let her tired, aching feet rest.

But, now that she was finally there, waiting for him to arrive, she began to second-guess herself . . . Maybe she shouldn't have come. What if this man, like the priest, chastised her and told her to atone. What if this man, like the ones who had once been her friends, turned away from the hideous pocks and sores on her face? What if this man began to yell and berate them all for their sin? What if this was a wasted effort and she would have to walk all of that way back home on her bleeding, blistered, festering feet having made the journey for no reason at all.

And into the whirlwind of doubts and misgivings in her mind, a voice began to speak . . . Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven . . .”

And she thought to herself, “I am all of those things. We are all of those things. Poor . . . Hungry . . . Weeping . . . Hated . . . Rejected . . . And yet, look. He is looking at us, he is HERE with us—the poor, the hungry, the reviled. He is looking at us, at the tears streaming down our faces, tears that leave muddy tracks in the dust and dirt that cover our cheeks after our long journeys. He is looking right at me and yet, I am not ashamed.”

It had been so long since she hadn't felt the shame of her disease. She had forgotten what it felt like to feel loved. She had given up on ever being accepted again. And yet this man, this man named Jesus . . . why, he loved her. But not just her, he loved all of them! All these people—the blind, lame, grieving, disfigured, covered in sores, all the people the world seemed to hate and revile—he loved them! He hadn't come to condemn them, he had come to love them and in his love she was healed. In his love she was transfigured. She had never felt so beautiful in all her life and in spite of what may or may not have been happening with her body, her spirit soared.

And such is the way of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christ is present, still, among the suffering, the broken, and the wondering. Christ seeks the anxious, the sleepless, the powerless. Christ abides with the addicted, the afflicted, and the addled. Christ comforts the grieving, the helpless, and the hopeless.

When, in these passages, Jesus says that those around him who are suffering are “blessed,” he doesn't mean blessed as in going around the table on Thanksgiving naming your blessings. The kind of blessing Jesus preaches about when he stands among the multitudes on a plain in Judea some 2000 years ago has nothing to do with tangible goods. Rather, the word blessed in the Sermon on the Plain, translated from

the Greek “makarios” is better thought of as a state of being—an altered state of being, often only experienced by those who have known deep suffering.

It is a blessedness born of deep suffering that teaches us the limitations of earthly wealth, power, and knowing. It is a blessedness born of deep suffering that forces us to realize that we cannot pull ourselves up by our bootstraps—shoot, some of us can't even find our bootstraps. It is a blessedness born of deep suffering that leads to the kind of strange relief and release that comes from finally accepting that there are times when we simply cannot help ourselves or save someone else. It is a blessedness born of deep suffering that transfigures us into people who seek Christ first and foremost, people who have learned in often painful and disillusioning ways, that the trappings of this world are just that—traps that hold us back in our relationship with Christ. It is a blessedness that is the new reality in which we die to ourselves, surrender our lives to God, and are born again into a full reliance upon, and trust in, the Living God in whom, and through whom, we live and have our being. It is truly a state of blessing—a transfiguration into a new reality of finding healing, wholeness, and hope in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who is as present here as he was on that Middle Eastern plain so many years ago. Thanks be to God.