

## Between Samaria and Galilee

When watching movie trailers advertising movies with sequels, they often begin with the phrase “the saga continues.” That seems to be the setting for our gospel passage today. Luke reminds us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. It seems that the journey may have paused for awhile as Jesus addressed the mixed crowd around him. Perhaps this crowd was walking along side him. Or perhaps even though there was no indication that the audience changed as Jesus told the parables we have looked at over the last few weeks, these things may have been repeated messages given to those in multiple places. Once Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem we aren’t given that many clues as exactly how far away that destination is geographically—there are few place indicators given. In chapter 13 we are told that Jesus went from one town and village to another, but these places are not given names...it wasn’t important which particular place that Jesus visited...just that he was on the move from place to place with the news of the nearness of the kingdom and descriptions of what the kingdom was like. At this point we have no way to identify where Jesus’ location would be on a map. Yet this passage begins with some indications of place—of geography. “On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” To be mentioned this place must have some significance. Often we read that verse as if it was a description of the trip I made this morning—on my way to Gastonia from Concord I went through the region of Charlotte. Except in the Luke passage the region being passed through is not named...It is just a region, a space between two others. It is not given a name for a very good reason...there was no region between Samaria and Galilee. Samaria and Galilee border each other. Some have suggested that Luke just didn’t know the geography of the area. Some have suggested this reflects the idea that Jesus is crossing the borders between the two areas frequently. Although it would be unlikely for a Jew to choose to go into Samaria on the way to anywhere, Jesus’ ministry is full of borders—barriers that he crosses. But it is quite possible that Luke is not making a point about the physical location where this encounter occurs—Jesus is on his way to the cross and those he encounters along the way reveal something to us about the nature of the kingdom that he has come to establish. It is well known that the people of Samaria and those of Galilee held strong and hostile convictions about each other. In any region or area that was between them would be a middle space where you would expect the tension between the ethnic and religious differences between the people to be palpable. It would be a type of no man’s land or twilight zone where boundaries are fuzzy. In such a space—what God inaugurates through Jesus is made manifest. When we are told that Jesus entered a village in this region and is approached by these ten lepers it is not clear to what ethnic group they belong. By law lepers were required to stay outside an inhabited space—and we are told that as they approached Jesus they met this requirement by keeping their distance. So when Jesus speaks to them, he is standing at the edge of the village. In multiple ways, Jesus is on the borderline for this encounter—he is somewhere between Samaria and Galilee—somewhere between in and out of an unidentified village. In this case, it is possible that the border which creates the region in between Samaria and Galilee is not a physical one but like one of the many barriers we erect between us and those we identify as “other”. Borders like that create side effects of resentments and prejudice. Under most circumstances people identifying as Jewish would not accept someone who was Samaritan into their group. The ten lepers have been quarantined

according to ritual governing their state of uncleanness. They have remained near their village, but live outside of it. When Jesus approaches the village, instead of calling out the required warning “unclean, unclean!” they cry out: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” They do not come close to him but they plead for mercy. They recognize who Jesus is: Master is a term used in Luke by those who are disciples. Jesus doesn’t reach out and touch them. Instead he tells them to “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” This is the ritually required step to be re-admitted into the life of the village. This is one of a very few instances where Jesus heals without touching, but healing is Jesus’ normal response to pleas for help. That Jesus heals them is not unique even if only done with a word and not explicitly stated. The lepers immediately start out and it is as they go that they are made clean. They are on their way to resume life within their families and community. This narrative does not describe the healing as much as it focuses on what happens afterwards. There is also no comment made about the instant obedience of the lepers—evidently they start out to see the priest before their conditions is no longer visible. They are anxious to be accepted again. It is as they went that they were made clean. All of the newly healed lepers must have noticed their new state which promised a bright future, but only one of them when he sees it turns around and goes back to Jesus, praising God with a loud voice. When he gets back to where Jesus he falls down at Jesus’ feet and thanks him. In the word chosen by Luke for giving thanks we find it is the same one which Jesus uses to give thanks at the Last Supper—it is the word from which Eucharist comes. It is the thanks one gives to God. It is only after that one healed man returns that we discover that he was a Samaritan. Jesus has healed a group of ten which includes this outsider. At this point Jesus’ makes a statement about the situation: “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” This can be seen as a reprimand for the failure of those nine to appreciate what has been done for them. A commentary on manners so to speak; a rebuke for failure to give praise and thanks. Luke’s gospel is one of the few places in Scriptures where the actions of a Samaritan is held up for praise—and not just in this story. Jesus then says to the Samaritan, “Get up and go on your way: your faith has made you well.” By this last statement we know that something besides healing of the leprosy has happened for this man which is somehow different from what the others experienced. As he is going to the priest this Samaritan has seen what has happened...and it has made a difference to him. Because he sees what has happened in a different way, this leper recognizes in this Jewish man, his reign and his power. Because he sees what has happened, the former leper has something for which to be thankful, praising God with a loud voice. Because he sees what has happened he changes direction, veering from his course toward a priest to first return to Jesus. In this land between—where borders are fuzzy—where Jew and Samaritan are together—we find healing which does not recognize borders. The phrase “your faith has made you well” can just as easily be translated from the Greek to be that your faith has made you whole. There is a connection between the “returning, praising and thanking” and the movement into the future—the getting up and going—in wholeness. We often assume that the other nine who were healed were Galileans, but we don’t know that. In fact, they just disappear. Ten were cleansed, able to again enter ordinary life, but only one was really made whole. Only one decided he didn’t want to fade back into the landscape. Instead he comes back and links himself with Jesus becomes whole. Sometimes it is only when we are in those times and places that are “in-between” that we can see beyond the boundaries

which we use to separate people, places and things. This story tells us that Jesus is also there in those “in-between places” ; in the no-man’s land of our lives. And when we see him there, return to him and give thanks for his presence, we too are made whole. Thanks be to God.