

Epiphany 6 B 2006

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Leprosy was a big deal in the ancient world. It wasn't necessarily leprosy as we now define it—it could be any skin disease, even ones that got cured eventually, but the people who had it were ritually unclean in Jewish society, and were basically treated like walking corpses. If you touched a person with leprosy, like Jesus does in today's gospel, you were now unclean in the same way that you would become unclean if you had touched a dead body. In this moment in the Gospel, faith, healing, social attitudes toward disease, fear all come together.

Which reminds me of a Doonesbury cartoon.

In it, a doctor is looking at an x-ray and says "Uh oh. Hope he's only a Sunday creationist." In the next frame, the doctor and patient are in the same room, the patient says, "TB? My God, are you sure?" and the doctor replies, "I'm afraid so. But we caught it early." "So my prognosis is good?" "Depends. Are you a creationist?" "Why yes, yes I am. Why do you ask?" "Because I need to know whether you want me to treat the TB bug as it was before antibiotics, or as the multiple drug-resistant strain it has evolved into." "Evolved?" says the patient. "Your choice," says the doctor. "If you choose the Noah's ark version, I'll just give you streptomycin." "Um, what are the newer drugs like?" The doctor concludes pointedly, "They're intelligently designed."

I will now come clean, myself. I signed us up at Epiphany to a project called "Evolution Sunday" which uses Darwin's 197<sup>th</sup> Birthday today as a reason for those 10,000 clergypersons who have signed the Clergy Letter Project, an effort to encourage theology and faith that is informed by science rather than afraid of it, to preach on themes of evolution.

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Do you want to be right, or do you want to be healed? I would imagine that most “Sunday creationists” would prefer the best of medical care to outmoded treatment, because it promotes a culture of life. People make strange decisions when faced with an opportunity for healing—in the Gospels, people are constantly (and we’re in a section of a bunch a healing miracles in the lectionary right now, so get used to it) coming to faith because they believe Jesus can heal them. Jesus holds out the possibility of a new life, new opportunities with a whole body. Jesus offers a cure not just for illness, but for the social problems surrounding being sick: he touches the unclean, the blind, the evil, and makes them clean, see, and good, and consequently, people arrive in droves from every direction until he has no rest.

I’m also intrigued at the issues of choice; the leper comes before Jesus and says, “If you choose, you can make me clean,” and Jesus responds, “I do choose.” Jesus always chooses health and life. The patient in the cartoon has to choose his treatment: the one that fits with his philosophy, or the one that will actually treat his disease. The patient in the cartoon is inclined to choose the way Jesus chooses. God’s agency is found in choice: we make decisions, and they are either of God, or not of God.

I always thought, based upon my high school science class, that evolution was something that happened over millions and millions of years, and wasn’t something that you could watch so to speak. As I’ve learned more in the last year, however, I’ve learned that evolution is something that we can watch—particularly in disease. The HIV virus has evolved spectacularly over the last 40 years. Evidently, it is something of an ideal case for evolution, because the virus makes many mistakes when it replicates, and so there are many mutations which can succeed or fail depending upon the situation of the

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host. Early in the AIDS epidemic in the U.S., the mutations that killed their hosts quickly flourished because their hosts unwittingly passed them on quickly to other partners. In the world of today, where it is harder for the disease to be passed on due to awareness, the mutations that allow the virus to linger, undetected for long periods of time have been successful. HIV has adapted to its situation, no differently than the first creatures that began to climb out of the primordial ooze onto dry land. AIDS is the new leprosy; the new disease with the social stigma, the disease that makes people want to expel those who have it and separate them and call them unclean, the walking dead.

And faced with this disease, and many others, we must choose whether to be “pure,” bound by philosophies and theologies that have fitted us in the past, or whether we will choose health. We will also have to look at God’s choice; because if we believe that life has evolved on this planet, then we will necessarily ask how God has been involved in that. I think many Christians see God in all of the mutations—each little change that has made us and everything else is a sign of God’s design. But if that’s true, then the HIV mutations are God’s design, too. I see Jesus in the Gospels choosing life and health, not death and disease, so I’m not comfortable with God as a designer. God acts not through picking out this mutation or that mutation, but by the choices we make. This is worth wrestling with—and so our Lenten Series this year will be about where we come from—we’ll look at the Biblical accounts of creation, we’ll hear from some scientists within our parish about what evolution is—and what proof there is of it—and we’ll consider a theology of creation that embraces scientific discovery rather than challenging it. None of us has thought about this enough—I find that people—including myself—are fairly ignorant about the relatively new scientific discoveries supporting

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evolution, and are also ignorant of a cohesive relationship between those discoveries and the nature of God. But it can be done. We can choose to do so, to link our minds and our spirits, and learn and grow as Christ would have us do: to become whole people, not ill or possessed by demons of ignorance, or bifurcated into intellect and spirit.

And part of the good news is that it isn't that hard. A few points from the story of Naaman and Elisha today: Naaman expects Elisha, the man of God, to come out for him and treat him specially. Do we expect God to come out and explain creation precisely for us? God's messengers come in many different forms, and one of the ways that God has revealed Godself is through creation, and the people most suited to learning about that creation are the people who spend their lives studying it. Science is a revelation of God. And the other point is that when Elisha tells Naaman to wash in the river Jordan to be cleaned of his leprosy, he refuses to do it at first because it's too easy. Sometimes it feels like faith should be extreme. We want God to be so powerful, so amazing, that we can't believe that God might indeed really be found in something as simple as washing in a river, or in a laboratory. We'd rather believe that God manifests himself in a coincidence or a hurricane than in the pursuit of knowledge.

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