

## The Story of Kalaupapa

John 9.1-7

FUPC

January 26, 2013

The word “leprosy” appears in the bible 68 times, and each time it appears, its not good. First recorded as a human disease around 600 b.c. in India, China and Egypt, it soon became known as the disease of living death. Its symptoms were gruesome and it was highly contagious. In pre-scientific times, leprosy was thought to be the result of sin and a curse of God upon the sinner.

Its symptoms start in the skin and peripheral nervous system, then spread to other parts of the body, the hands, feet, face, and earlobes. Patients with leprosy experience disfigurement of the skin and bones, twisting of the limbs, and curling of the fingers to form the characteristic claw hand. Facial changes include thickening of the outer ear and collapsing of the nose.

Tumor-like growths called *lepromas* may form on the skin and in the respiratory tract, and the optic nerve may deteriorate. The largest number of deformities develop from loss of pain sensation due to extensive nerve damage. For instance, inattentive patients can pick up a cup of boiling water without flinching. And because there is no sensation of pain, some patients even had fingers or toes chewed off by rodents in their sleep.

And because the disease was so highly contagious, people who had it were shunned. In the Bible, lepers were required to stay outside the city gates, and far away from people. If someone approached them, there were to call out “Unclean, Unclean”. No one would dare to touch them or go near them on purpose.

That’s why Jesus’ relationship to these people was so amazing. He went near them, he listened to them, he touched them. And he refuted the common belief of the day that their having this disease had anything to do with their sin, or the sin of their parents. In today’s reading, though the man is blind, the same thinking is there – people asked, “what did this man do, or what did his parents do to anger God that he was struck blind?”

In response, Jesus healed him by sending him to the pool of Siloam where he washed his eyes and he could then see. He was healed. The pool of Siloam located in Jerusalem where Jesus sent people to be healed is the connection to the tiny church located at Kalaupapa called The Siloama Church. It stands close to the church built by Father Damien called St. Philomena.

In January, 1866 the first boat load of patients was dropped off on the rocky shoreline of the peninsula that is known as Kalaupapa. The decision was made by the agents of the Board of Health on Oahu who were charged with the task of finding a suitable location for those with the disease. There was fresh water available. The location was difficult to get to... and more importantly very difficult to leave. It was isolated and far from other communities.

The ships carrying the victims of the disease anchored offshore because there was no suitable landing facility. The passengers were transferred to row boats when the weather was calm. But when the seas were rough, which was often, they had to swim to shore and their personal belongings and supplies were tossed overboard. Sometimes, they made it to shore and sometimes not.

There were no facilities or personnel to greet these first passengers. They were left with minimal clothing and supplies. They probably had only what they wore on the overnight trip from the holding station in Kaka`ako, Oahu.

Since that first boat load, 8000 men, women and children made that lonely voyage to this place of quarantine and exile, knowing that they would never see their families again. They had said goodbye to fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives. Ninety five percent of the people sent were of Hawaiian ancestry.

Those early residents of Kalaupapa survived and eventually turned to the only help that offered any hope at all – the love of God. As they gathered themselves together, they formed a church called the Siloama Church. Stripped of all earthly possessions and connections, their only possession was their incredible faith in God. Thirty five men and women formed this church in December of 1866, nearly 12 months after the first of them had arrived.

The story of the Siloama church is a story of faith tested by terrible physical difficulties and trials. It would be natural for them to give in to self-pity and blame God by asking “Why me?”. But rather than that, they gathered as a fellowship of wounded souls to find comfort and hope in one another and in God. Stripped of their humanity and outcasts from society, they turned to faith in God. They found great encouragement in this story of the man who was healed at the pool of Siloam.

This is an important story to tell. Its important to remind ourselves that when we are pushed to the very limit of our endurance and understanding, there is still something more. Underneath are the everlasting arms of our Loving and Gracious Creator God.

In the front wall of the Siloama Church sanctuary is a plaque that describes this first group of leprosy patients who turned to God for help. It reads:

Thrust out by mankind  
Twelve women and twenty three men  
Crying aloud to God  
Their only refuge  
Formed a church  
The first in the desolation  
That was Kalawao.

God’s power was and continues to be manifested in these 35 men and women. Their shining faith was a testimony to the 8000 who came after them. On this beautiful peninsula backed by the highest sea cliffs in the world are buried some of the most beautiful people that have ever lived. Physically disfigured, bodies ravaged by disease, separated from family and friends, outcasts from society.... Still the light of their faith and courage shines brightly through them down to the present day.

This story is an encouragement to all who are tempted to lose hope because of their circumstances. It is an anchor for any who feel lost in the chaos of failure and confusion. It is an inspiration for us as we ask hard questions about our church – why are we here, what are we about, do we still have a purpose, where do we experience God is our midst?

May we always remember that in our islands there lived saints whose faith and hope shine down to us still in January 2014... 150 years later, teaching us that no setback is too great, so failure too deep, no loss so profound, no weakness so debilitating that God cannot heal it and change everything in ways we could have never imagined.

Amen.