

Emerging from the dark (Luke 17:11-19)

In the West Bank town of Burqin, there is a Roman cistern that is said to have once housed people with leprosy.

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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The tiny town of Burqin is about two hours from Jerusalem. With just 7,000 residents and 60 or so Christians, it's not a popular stop for pilgrims and tourists, but a friend who served as a mission coworker in the region always tries to bring groups to the town when he visits, to see the place where it's believed that Jesus healed ten people with leprosy.

In those times, leprosy was an isolating condition with no reliable cure. People with leprosy were seen as unclean, carrying such a stigma that many believed the condition was punishment for sin. Lepers were feared and shunned—pitied if they were lucky, despised if they were not. A church currently sits at the official site of the healing in Burqin, and it's one of the oldest Christian churches on the planet.

The site at Burqin includes an abandoned Roman cistern that, according to the locals, housed those with leprosy. A hole in the top of the cistern, intended for the collection of rainwater, became the place where people would pass food and water to the people inside.

The Holy Land is dotted with sites like this, and legend doesn't always match up with the reality of our scriptural tales. Still, it's bracing to imagine such an existence—to imagine living an isolated life in an underground stone receptacle. This cave is where they eat. Where they sleep. Where they reside together, a ragtag family of outcasts, waiting for—what? A cure? A miracle? Waiting, perhaps, for their misery to end, one way or another.

Whatever they're waiting for, it's Jesus who walks by. How do they know to call out to him, to call him Lord and master and to beg for his mercy? Has the news about Jesus somehow filtered down into this stone cavern? Do they sense something different in Jesus' presence, some kind of son-of-God-ness that hangs around him like a cloud of grace? Or, perhaps most heartbreaking to contemplate, they have begged for mercy from a thousand other people, only to be ignored.

Jesus hears their cries, and he tells them to go to the priests. On the way, they are made clean, restored from the horrific condition that has plagued them for God knows how long. Jesus doesn't heal them first and *then* direct them to the priests. The gospel says, "As they went, they were made clean." The sending comes first, followed by the healing—only after they commit to the journey.

Imagine the decision to emerge from that dark cave, blinking in the light, desert sunshine beating down on weakened bodies and damaged skin, but setting out anyway, simply because they trust the Lord of love who tells

them to go. It's an astounding act of faith, to take those first steps.

Then one man turns back to shout his thanks. Jesus clearly singles out this Samaritan as worthy of praise—notable, since Samaritans were the enemies of Israel. Jesus asks, “Where are the others?” and we're meant to tut-tut at those ungrateful nine who didn't even bother to say thank you. But I don't hear Jesus' question harshly. (After all, he was the one who told them to go!)

I hear sadness.

Where are the nine? Jesus asks, because they're missing out. They're missing out on this expression of spontaneous joy from a foreigner. This person, detested by the community, has something to teach them. The nine are so quick to hightail it to church that they miss the fact that church is happening right there on the road, out in the open in front of God and everybody.

My friend told me one more thing about the church in Burqin, the church of the ten lepers, almost as an afterthought. He said there's a legend around this story that's told in this region—that when Jesus walked by that cistern where those desperate people were kept, the opening of the cave broke wide apart, so that the ten could come out. The foundation of the crypt was shaken and the wall came tumbling down.

And if you're thinking *Hmm, stones rolled back from the opening of a cave, where have I heard that before?*, you're right on the mark.