

## *“The Healing of a Great Man”*

*Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany*

*February 11-12, 2012*

*II Kings 5 and Mark 1*

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The theme of our sermon comes from the story of Naaman: the faith of a little servant girl acted out on enemy foreign soil heals the Naaman. Foreign, female, slave and young. You couldn't get any lower on the status ladder. The great man Naaman couldn't have more going for him.

God has a great sense of humor. Army commanders and Kings generally have a fairly high opinion of themselves. Naaman and his king were no exception. So when a Hebrew slave girl made a suggestion through Naaman's wife (also unnamed), the Commander had to swallow pretty hard. One of the gifts the leprosy gave to Naaman was as a powerful humbling force. Or was it desperation that forced him to pay attention to her suggestion?

Historians argue whether it is appropriate to tell the history of a nation or people by reference to Great People, or whether it should include the little people. And yet it is not so simple as saying, God is automatically for the underdog. We see this in every aspect of the ministry and life of Jesus and all the prophets before Him, how central God's regard is for the lowly, the enslaved, and the captive in chains of the enemy. Unlike our culture today, we see in our faith how God reaches both the Somebody's and Nobodies in His healing way. So let the historians argue, from little to great we hear the Someone calling us to pay attention to this word.

We hear the "LORD had given victory to Naaman and Aram." This may come as a surprise to us, yet it is consonant with Biblical history and theology. Because Israel

confessed their God as the one true God, supreme over all other gods, the only way to explain a defeat like the one suffered at the hands of the Arameans (1 Kings 22) was to interpret it as God's will. The high and mighty as well as the lowly and least are both in God's merciful gaze. Israel herself had to be humbled, to become a suffering servant, as the prophet Isaiah said in chapter 53. The little servant girl embodies this humbling!

Thus, the opening declaration is not so much a statement about Naaman's status before God (i.e., he was favored by God), as it is a reflection of how Israel viewed God and the reality of their world. To be sure, what happens to Naaman at the end of the story is the result of the faith exhibited by an unnamed young girl who represents Israel. Our story turns on the same pivot as the Gospel lesson, **how** God heals. Foreign slave girls, rude prophets, muddy creeks – God uses the least expected people and the most ordinary things to bring healing. Healing of the body sometimes, yes, but especially healing of the soul. Isn't it so with us? God works right under our nose in humdrum?

At the beginning of the story, Naaman is portrayed as a powerful military leader, unstoppable on the battlefield. The narrator (vs. 1) introduces the point of tension in the story: **"Although he was a great warrior, he was a leper."** Naaman was able to "save" his people from foreign threats, but he could not save himself from leprosy. It is ever thus! For everything from which we count on "good and help", there is a nemesis. We do not have life in ourselves, so fragile we are that we face enemies large and small—no matter who we are, great or small. A piece of beef in the esophagus, a little clot of blood in a major artery, a nasty virus... we great warriors are all lepers in ... in... in sin! Every one of us has our nemesis! Call them the unholy trinity: sin, death, and the Devil.

The next figure introduced into the story is the antithesis of Naaman, we encounter this no name "young woman." He has a name, she does not. He was a great

warrior, she was a captive. He lived a life that demanded respect, she was a servant. Yet despite being on foreign soil, and despite being a captive of war, she had the one thing that could rid Naaman of the archenemy that plagued him. The servant girl, nobody to the great, who had been delivered into the hands of the Arameans speaks of this prophet in Samaria who could deliver him from leprosy.

Beginning in verse 4, the conversation and concern present within an Aramean household (Naaman, his wife, and their servant girl) shifts to the international and political realm. Naaman tells his king, the king prepares letters for the king of Israel (perhaps Jehoram), and considerable wealth is gathered in an effort to buy the favor of the king. This is the way the world works, with movers and shakers able to get what they want and need. They are at the top of the food chain, and the food is healing or we might say health care. Only in this story, the little servant girl, the widow and orphan, and the people's prophets who bear the word of God to those hungry for righteousness, mercy, and true life. Healing is in the One who will be the lowest of the lowly, not aspiring for greatness for its sake even for a minute.

It is worth noting that the narrator goes into great detail to depict this correspondence between the two kings. The response of the king of Israel suggests that such a letter could set teeth on edge if such a summons was not met. But the question remains: why would the narrator highlight the exchange between these characters? Some might argue it was done simply "to tell the story," however; it is also possible that the narrator has drawn attention to the kings intentionally.

In this story, as in our Gospel lessons from Mark, there has been a building of "power structures." In the Gospels, Jesus gains a reputation of being a stronger, greater man than diseases, demons, and death; thus, his concern for the little to least sorts makes

a buzz unlike any other. Here in II Kings there is a lot of buzz as well, the unnamed captive Israelite woman speaks to Naaman's wife. Naaman's wife speaks to Naaman. Naaman speaks to the Aramean king. And now the Aramean king writes to the Israelite king asking that Naaman be healed. The king of Israel is at the "apex" of the power structure and the little girl at the bottom means the world is turning upside down, the food chain is flipping. Each conversation has led to this final conversation with him. And yet the king himself declares, **"Am I God to give death or life?"** The one with the power not only confesses that he is powerless, but equally shocking, appears unaware of what everyone else in the story knows; that there is a prophet, a man of God, in his land who can heal leprosy. To be humbled by the Word is the point. Humility is not a self-attainment, but the result of God's healing word cleansing the sinful heart, as in the great King David.

Great leaders are people who know that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. They know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. They know that faith is not merely staged sincerity, pleading piety, or power plays on a sort of "Father knows best" outlook. Great leaders know what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "The one thing that matters [upon cleansing forgiveness] is practical obedience. That will resolve [man's] difficulties and make him free to become the child of God."

Watching the frenzied debates in the midst of our very deep economic, moral, and political mess, one is led to believe that we really think the next president of the United States will be something of a healing messiah who will save us from somebody else's sins. It would seem there is nothing to do. Naaman was not looking for wholeness from the prophet, rooted in the worship of the true God, washed in that God's cleansing forgiveness.

I need a real savior. So do you. So does America. More than a political messiah, we need Messiah Jesus, by whose wounds and stripes we are healed. When he healed in our Gospel lesson, he took the illness along with the sin, the nemesis of death, and the evil of Satan; and He gave back true wholeness of life. The exchange of disease as with sin for wholeness and forgiveness is what the Cross of Jesus is all about.

Epiphany under God's word means that in God's light we see light, in God's healing and humbling Word we receive humility. The healing presence of Christ Jesus is always with us, but we pay great attention to the food chain and forget that God feeds us life in the light of bread and wine, water and word, and ancient words of forgiveness and final hope. Back to the story of how God heals with ordinary means to those who believe!

Elisha hears of the king's anguish and gives the king an order, instructing him to send Naaman to him (suggesting who *really has the power* in this story, not just any power *but the power over death, the power to heal and to make whole*). Naaman appears at Elisha's house, and instead of coming out to greet the "great warrior" and his entourage, Elisha sends out a messenger with instructions. Rather than follow these instructions though, Naaman is angered by Elisha's apparently flippant response. Elisha does not see him but sends a messenger with the prescription – seven washes in the Jordan – simple instructions. What follows is a give and take. Naaman is upset at the concrete simplicity and the locality of this call to discipleship. Are not the rivers of Abana and Pharpar in Aram as good as the muddy Jordan? Calmed by his servant, he follows Elisha's prescription and is restored. "The one thing that matters is practical obedience. That will resolve [man's] difficulties and make him free to become the child of God."

While this is *where the pericope ends*, this is in my opinion where the story begins.

Naaman confesses, "**Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel...**" While one can argue with Naaman's exclusive location of the God of Israel in Israel, Elisha does not. Rather, in his healing, Naaman has been met and healed by the Lord in a way that leads to knowing. How delightfully strange and gracious! Simple word and simple water can do such great things, said Luther! This is ...

Yet, it is a deeply personal healing lesson, a lesson also tied to the political lesson. These really are dark times, very dark, but history is full of dark times. There really aren't any light times, even though some times are lighter than others. But something is deeply broken in human nature, in you and me, and it brings about things on a great international scale—famine, terrorism, wars, oppression, greed, fraud, political manipulation, political catastrophe, baneful waste, and real suffering. No frail mortal can save us from all this, especially when we realize that "all this" includes us, and our own sins. The shifting of political power will inevitably shift it from one fallen mortal's shoulders to another.

There are better and worse mortals, better and worse presidents; however, don't forget the cleansing healing in the change accorded right here in the name of Jesus. The opportunists, swindlers, and demagogues should be thrown out, and better mortals brought in. But no election can take the place of the need of a real savior and real healing.

Indeed we need more men and women who are humbled and made whole, as Naaman. We need more people who willing to be nameless and to share the Word of healing with great and small, to serve rather than be served. Go wash in the river where Jesus was baptized, be clean, and be little servants in this strange dark land! Be whole in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.