

2nd Kings 5:1-14
How God spoke to Naaman.

Ruskin Falls, September 8, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (NRSV)

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

(1)

Naaman was commander of a foreign army, the army of the king of Aram, the land just north of Israel. In Aram, he was a worshiper of the Canaanite storm god, Rimmon. However, as we're told in the verses immediately following what we just read, as result of Naaman's healing, he became a worshiper of the God of Israel. This morning, I would like to focus on the events that led up to his healing and, in turn, to his conversion to the God of Israel.

(2)

The mighty warrior Naaman suffered from a skin disease for which he had not been able to find a cure. Most English translations of the Bible call his disease *leprosy*. That's not a precise translation of the original Hebrew word, but it's maybe the best we can do in English. The Hebrew word referred to a number of afflictions of the skin, none of which was the same thing as the disease we think of today as leprosy.

In any case, Naaman had an affliction of the skin. The affliction did not prevent him from

becoming a military hero in Aram. Nevertheless, the disease was unpleasant, it was disconcerting, and Naaman hadn't found a cure for it anywhere in Aram.

But he did finally meet with a cure. It came by way of one of the earliest Israelite prophets, Elisha, who was known in Israel for exercising miraculous healing powers. Naaman's healing occurred as a miracle under the direction of Elisha. And what I ask you to take special note of this morning, is this: what 2nd Kings tells us about *how* that healing came about.

In 2nd Kings, the story of Naaman's healing serves to remind us that, while God can and does work through extraordinary people and events, God also is at work all around us through people and events that may strike us as oh, so simple and ordinary. The story of Naaman's healing is an important reminder that God works among us not just through the mighty and the miraculous, but also through ordinary people and events in our ordinary, everyday life.

(3)

To begin with, we are reminded that God works through *ordinary people*.

Yes, Elisha is a great prophet in Israel, who performs impressive, miraculous, deeds. But God doesn't work only through the likes of an Elisha. God also is at work through the less spectacular, everyday folks in the story. For example, nothing would have happened to begin with, had it not been for the young Israelite woman who had become something of a prisoner of war in the land of Aram.

Israel and Aram earlier had been at war against each other, and Aram had defeated Israel. . . . (A *footnote here*: interestingly, we are told in 2nd Kings that the God of Israel actually had been on the side of Israel's enemy, Aram, in that war; God gave *Aram* the victory over God's chosen people, *Israel!* Obviously, being God's chosen people doesn't mean Israel can expect God to be on their side, no matter what they do. Sometimes, God lets God's people learn a lesson by letting them reap the consequences of their own poor decisions!) At any rate . . .

Israel and Aram had been at war with each other a short while back, and Aram had defeated Israel. Among the Israelites taken captive was this young woman. She was taken back to Aram and forced to work as a maidservant to Naaman's wife. She was a nobody in Aram. She was someone people like Naaman would have looked down on as an inferior. And yet this slave-girl turns out to be Naaman's guide to God. It was not some sage and important individual who inspired Naaman to go to Elisha. It was a slave-girl. Naaman found healing only because of the good will and help of a slave-girl. God was working on Naaman through a young woman who – in Naaman's social world – was not considered an important person at all.

And later, after Naaman had been told to go wash in the river and then had decided to leave without doing that, it was not religious leaders or trusted advisors or other soldiers who persuaded him to go back to the river. It was his ordinary servants who did that. These servants had little standing in Naaman's social circles. They were not looked to as important individuals. Yet it was through them that God was at work in Naaman's life, to guide him toward the healing he was to receive from God.

It is important to stay mindful of the fact that God works in our lives through common, ordinary, everyday folks – even folks we don't ordinarily think of turning to for guidance and advice. Sometimes, when we need God's help, we look to important religious leaders to give it. We

maybe expect God to address us mainly through the likes of trained pastors, or famous revival leaders, or powerful religious thinkers, or effective motivational speakers. But God is just as likely to be working on us through people whom we ordinarily may not have expected to be used by God to get through to us. In other words: when God sets out to send us healing, to put in us a new and right spirit, and to open us to divine guidance, God may well approach us through unlikely people – people we normally would not have thought of as able to help us – even people we once viewed as beneath us.

In this respect there is something important to be learned from Naaman. His biblical greatness lay not in being a military hero. His biblical greatness lay in his readiness to take the godly advice of his wife's slave-girl and of his servants. To his credit, he did not dismiss their advice just because they were beneath him on the social status ladder. He listened to them. He took them seriously. He did not let haughtiness, arrogance, or pride cut him off from learning from them. And only for this reason did Naaman become opened to what God was doing with him.

And so, one question the story of Naaman puts to you and me is this: Will we do the same? Are we open to hearing God speak to us through someone we don't ordinarily think of as able to give us advice and counsel in important matters? Are we genuinely open to the possibility that God might be reaching out to us right now through persons we don't normally look to for help? Or are we letting haughtiness, arrogance, and pride cut us off from what God is doing with us through unexpected people? Are we truly open to the fact that God sometimes (indeed, maybe most often!) addresses us through unlikely and improbable voices?

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The story of Naaman should remind us also that God works not only through ordinary people, but also through *ordinary events*.

It is indeed to Naaman's credit that he listened to others as he did. On the other hand, when he does get to Elisha's house, he's wanting something more than ordinary. He wants something fantastic, spectacular, miraculous, whose exciting drama can be witnessed by others as an extraordinary moment. He wants at least something new and different. And when he sees how ordinary and common everything is that's about to happen, he thinks it's not enough: Elisha doesn't come out to meet him, much less to perform some ritual such as laying his hands on Naaman. Elisha just sends a messenger to tell Naaman, "Go wade out into the near-by river, and everything will be alright." And this leaves Naaman disappointed and frustrated.

Imagine someone going to a *healing crusade*, expecting to be powerfully cured of some ailment. They're excited that they're going to be with a famous healer, amidst hundreds, maybe thousands, of people, and maybe even a TV audience. They're expecting to be touched and prayed over and thereby cured by a prominent evangelist. But then they arrive at the auditorium, and one of the ushers comes up and says, "Look, you don't need all this whoop-dee-doo. Just step over into the near-by restroom and wash your hands, and you will be healed." Probably, they would find that strange and disappointing. The truth is, we want God to work on us in more spectacular ways than that. We want "great moments" in our life with God.

But the story of Naaman should make us mindful of the fact that God can and does work in very non-spectacular ways through very non-spectacular events all around us. God doesn't need a mighty river to deliver us blessing and guidance; God can work just as well through the muddy little waters nearby. God can and does work on us through what is ordinary and often taken for

granted. You may think you're just reading a book; you may think you're just taking an ordinary walk through the woods; you may think you're just sitting in the same old pew in the same old sanctuary you've been worshiping in for years; you may think you're just doing something you do all the time. But pay attention: God can and does use the things and places of our ordinary, everyday lives, to touch and move and change us.

Sometimes we act as if we just can't believe it's God at work, unless something happens that is dramatic, miraculous, awesome, overwhelming. But sometimes God acts quite otherwise than by making anything extraordinary happen. As Elisha's predecessor, the prophet Elijah, once learned (1st Kings 19:11-12), sometimes God speaks not in the mighty winds, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in a still small voice, sometimes even in the sound of silence.

(5)

What is told in the books of 1st and 2nd Kings covers the period from the death of King David in Jerusalem to the time of the exile of the children of Israel in the land of Babylon – a period of roughly 400 years. That story is told mostly in terms of powerful figures and events of the day. But also there are reminders – and we need to take them to heart – that while God sometimes acts in extraordinary ways in our lives, God also, and even usually, announces God's presence and power through people and situations that make up our regular, everyday world.

Therefore: Stay on the lookout for God to be at work in your life through people who are not extraordinary but ordinary, and in situations that are not spectacular but common.

And always keep crucially in mind that the *flip-side* of that is also true: Even now, God may well be using *you*, in all the simplicity and ordinariness of your daily life, to make a very particular and significant difference in someone else's life. Therefore, as we'll sing in a moment: *live and work and pray and sing so God can use you, anywhere, anytime!* And: be always listening for God, anywhere, anytime, to speak *to you through* the ordinary people and ordinary events that make up our ordinary, everyday life together. Amen.