

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
August 2 & 3, 2014
Dan Anderson
Slave, Commander, Associate Pastor
2 Kings 5:1-19

All summer long we have been mining treasures in the Books of the Kings. Today we have a whole jewelry box full of gems. What I would like to do is this: we will read through the entire text making observations as we go along. When we reach the end of the passage, we will revisit three of the characters and then I will share a story that I hope ties it all together.

1 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

Aram was located just north and east of Israel. When King Asa of Judah couldn't overrun King Baasha of Israel, he paid the king of Aram to make an alliance with him. Aram then attacked Israel from the north, forcing Baasha to stop attacking Judah in the south. Naaman was the commander who organized the armies of Aram against Israel. Our text says "through him the Lord had given victory to Aram." Does it seem at all odd that God had given victory to an enemy of Israel?

The cycle of responding, rejecting, repenting and being restored is repeated over and over in the Old Testament. Sometimes God would use other kingdoms to get the people's attention. In this account, God used Naaman to call the nation back to Yahweh. We learn Naaman had leprosy.

Some of you know that in worse case scenarios, people with leprosy might have skin lesions, numbness in their extremities and may lose appendages. People with this kind of leprosy were considered unclean and would be removed from the community. Anyone who came in contact with a leper would also be unclean. In the account before us, it is unlikely that this is the kind of leprosy being referred to. In the Old, or First Testament, the word leprosy was most often used to refer to all kinds of skin disorders. The Book of Leviticus carefully spells out a variety of skin conditions and identifies which would render a person unclean and lead to excommunication. To avoid any confusion about what makes a person unclean, let me read what Leviticus 13:40-41 has to say.

40 A man who has lost his hair and is bald is clean. 41 If he has lost his hair from the front of his scalp and has a bald forehead, he is clean.

Phew! Some of us are relieved! Now that we've cleared that up, let's return to our story. We know that Naaman lived with his family. We know he served with the King and the army. If he had the kind of leprosy we now know as Hansen's Disease, he would have been removed from

his home, his family, and his position on the king's cabinet. Also, he would not have been allowed to travel.

2 Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

Even though a peace treaty was in place, there were still border skirmishes and quarrels over which territory belonged to which country or ethnic group. In war it was common practice to turn prisoners into slaves. A young girl from an Israeli border town had been taken into Naaman's home as a house slave. This young girl said to Naaman's wife, "There is a prophet in my home country, in Samaria, actually, who could cure my master of his leprosy. He should go and see the prophet Elisha."

4 Naaman went to his master

(that was the king)

and told him what the girl from Israel had said. 5 "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. 6 The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

Naaman went to his boss and told him what the girl had said and the king said, "Go and I will send a letter of support." Why would the King of Israel have anything to do with either the King of Aram or Naaman? Good question. Even though Naaman was commander of the armies that had defeated Israel and in spite of border skirmishes, the two nations were now living under a truce. The leaders were relatively cordial to each other. The King of Aram sent a letter of introduction, gifts equaling 750 lbs of silver and 150 lbs of gold, enough fabric to make 10 outfits, and a request that the King of Israel would heal his commander. The King of Aram may have assumed Elisha would be under the authority of his king, but that is not how the king of Israel understood the letter.

7 As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

As a sign of grief, anxiety and terror the King of Israel tore his clothing. He understood this correspondence as a provocation to war, a pretext to justify another invasion.

8 When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

Elisha's response to the king alludes to a quarrel recorded in chapter 3 between the prophetic office and the political office. Perhaps the prophet was annoyed that the only time the king ever came calling was when the nation was in trouble. Elisha said, "Send him to me so that he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." In this exchange we find the central point of this account. This story is recorded to reveal and confirm the power of Yahweh in a country where people had abandoned their commitment to the one true God. It is not simply Naaman who is to know this truth. The king and all the people of Israel will be reminded of their heritage and called to return to their true King.

With all the trappings of importance, Naaman made his way to the door of Elisha's home. Elisha does not seem overly impressed with the symbols of power. He gives Naaman a back-of-the-hand slight by not coming to the door. Perhaps Elisha was more interested in showing that power to heal came from God and not from a prophet. "Wash yourself seven times in the Jordan." There was nothing magical about the Jordan River. Seven is often used as a number for completeness. Elisha was asking for complete trust and complete obedience.

11 But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

Naaman was ticked! "I thought for sure he would come to me and wave a magic wand, perhaps utter some incantation and zap! I would be cured! But no, he wants me to go for a swim in the dirty Jordan! Man! We've got pristine waters in Damascus, better than anything in all of Israel. The Jordan? You're killing me!" And he stormed off!

13 Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" 14 So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Naaman's servants exhibited what we might call a self-differentiated non-anxious presence. "Naaman," they replied, "If he had asked you to run a half-marathon, do 100 pushups, or eat kale and drink carrot juice for a month, would you have done it? It's not that big a deal. Just do it!" So Naaman did and he was healed. It wasn't about the water. Perhaps healing even happened in spite of the water. It was about believing and acting. With little faith but lots of encouragement, Naaman did what was asked and God acted.

15 Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel."

Earlier I suggested that this story is recorded to reveal and to confirm the power of Yahweh in a land where people had abandoned a commitment to the one true God. Naaman stands in contrast to ancient Israel. In a country that had forgotten Yahweh and entertained false religions, Naaman saw and believed in the one true God.

Then Naaman said to Elisha,

"So please accept a gift from your servant." 16 The prophet answered, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused. 17 "If you will not," said Naaman, "please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD."

Why would he want to take dirt back to Aram? Was there some magic in Israeli soil? At that time, some folks believed that the gods were territorial. Perhaps Naaman shared this belief or perhaps he simply wanted a symbolic base on which to erect an altar. Naaman continued,

18 But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also--when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this." 19 "Go in peace," Elisha said.

Rimmon was the god of storms and war. He was called The Thunderer. Naaman's boss was a follower of Rimmon. As Naaman stood before the prophet, he began to reflect on the implications of the commitment he had just made. He seems to be asking, "Can I get a mulligan here? Can I fudge just a bit?" Elisha does not directly answer this question. He simply replies, "Go in peace." Perhaps he is saying, "Naaman, do the right thing and you will be at peace." So Naaman went on his way.

After Naaman had traveled some distance, 20 Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, "My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him." 21 So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. "Is everything all right?" he asked. 22 "Everything is all right," Gehazi answered. "My master sent me to say, 'Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.' " 23 "By all means, take two talents," said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. 24 When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left.

Gehazi was perhaps the associate to the prophet Elisha, sort of like an associate pastor. He would never have the spotlight or the perks that came with the senior office and now he saw a chance for a little gain. "What harm could it do?" So he crafted a story. "Elisha sent me with a message that two young men from the company of prophets have just come from the hill country and we could use a little help." Perhaps these two young men from the company of prophets were young students at Bethel Seminary. Some may not know that Bethel Seminary is actually mentioned in the Bible, at least in *The Living Bible*. The text of 2nd Kings 2:2-3 reads,

2So they went on together to Bethel. ³ There the young prophets of Bethel Seminary came out to meet them

There is no mention of Princeton or Fuller or Garrett or Gordon. Bethel seems to have a long history dating back centuries before Christ. I just thought you and some other Bethel grads

might like to know. Well, Gehazi, who I doubt went to Bethel Seminary, fabricated a big story about poor seminary students and duped Naaman out of 150 lbs of silver and enough fabric for two new outfits, and he kept it all for himself.

25 When he went in and stood before his master, Elisha asked him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" "Your servant didn't go anywhere," Gehazi answered. 26 But Elisha said to him, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes--or olive groves and vineyards, or flocks and herds, or male and female slaves? 27 Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and his skin was leprous--it had become as white as snow.

Gehazi piled lie upon lie and got caught in his own web of deceit. His actions discredited and demeaned the one true God and the office of the prophet, and the consequences for deception were devastating. There you have the story of Naaman the leper. So what? To answer that question, let's take just a few more minutes to consider three of the characters in this account: the associate, the commander, and the slave girl. What can we learn from observing their faith?

The associate, Gehazi, had been around the church for a long time. He knew the right answers. He had probably done seven years of SSF, Scroll Study Fellowship. He may have attended seminary. The knowledge of God was in his head, but was faith in his heart? As Elisha's right hand man, Gehazi was accountable for the integrity of the office and the perception of faith in the community. Gehazi did not always agree with his superiors and he did not like depending on the charity of others. When opportunity came for a little financial gain, Gehazi succumbed to the temptation. He abandoned what he knew to be right and good for a little temporary pleasure. He deceived, he lied, and he took what was not his to take. Then he tried to cover it up.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who scattered seeds. Some fell on shallow ground. The roots were not deep and the plants withered and died. I wonder if the faith of Gehazi, this associate, was like those seeds of faith? Then there is Naaman, the commander, who was miraculously healed by God. His life was dramatically changed. He was on fire for God. It was as if he had just returned from a spiritual retreat or church camp. In his excitement, he hurried back to Elisha to proclaim his newfound faith. "Now I know for certain and I believe!" He offered to make a large contribution to aid the work of the prophet. He gathered symbols to mark and remember this fresh experience of faith. Then he began to think about the implications of his decision and was conflicted. "When I go home, what will I do? In Aram they bow to a different god. My boss might not understand." Naaman began to back away slightly. "Elisha," he asked, "Will it be okay if I bow down? Will God forgive this small compromise?" Perhaps he was like the seed that fell among thorns which threatened to crowd out his faith.

Then there was the young Jewish girl. Life had been unfair. She was snatched from home and family and forced into domestic servitude in a foreign land. Nothing was familiar. She was just a slave. Property. Of little significance other than what she could provide for her owner. She had no voice. If anyone had reason to doubt God, certainly this child did. What kind of God would allow this to happen to an innocent girl? What kind of person would worship such a God? In a strange land and a strange culture where her faith was not shared, it would be easy to remain silent and to hide convictions, but this young girl spoke up. She said, "Where I come from God is alive! I know a man of God who can help." Wouldn't she harbor bitterness? Why would she want to help her captor? Perhaps because she had been touched by the grace of God. Even in

horrible circumstances, she had learned to draw on God's love and faithfulness. Her faith was like that of the seed that fell on fertile soil. The roots went deep. It grew strong and stood firm during storms. It bore much fruit. Jesus said we must become like a little child. We must have the faith of a servant girl to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Many years ago a rookie pastor was leading a small congregation in the suburbs of Des Moines. We were trying to understand what it means to be touched by the grace of God and how we might touch others with the love of Jesus. Marion, one of our members, worked in an office downtown. Marion was trying to live out her faith in the workplace. What would it mean to live like Jesus? What would it mean to be salt and light in the market? Many women employed by that company shared lunch and conversation in the break room. One day the talk turned to welfare moms. Comments became increasingly judgmental, prejudicial, and angry. For a while, Marion sat in silence. Finally she spoke up. She said something like this, "I don't know that we should sit here and judge these women. We don't really understand their circumstances. These are people that God loves and I doubt any of them would choose to be welfare moms."

I honestly don't know where the conversation went from that point but I do know that Shondell was paying attention. She later approached Marion and thanked her for speaking up. Shondell told Marion, "I have two boys and their father does not live with me. Not long ago before I got this job, I was a welfare mom." In subsequent weeks as Marion and Shondell got to know each other better, they began to talk about faith. One day at the invitation of Marion, Shondell and her boys came to our church. The boys became active in Sunday School. A while later someone from the church reached out to the boys' father and they began to meet one-on-one to study the Bible. I would like to tell you that Shondell and the boys' father were reconciled and lived happily ever after, but I honestly don't remember all the details and after 30 years, I have lost contact with the families. What I do remember is that Marion, touched by the grace of Jesus, shared that graciousness with the people in her world and her life made a difference.

What about you and me? The walk of faith can take many forms. Are we more like the associate whose faith was easily abandoned for something that looked better in the moment? Are we perhaps like Naaman, squeezed into compromise by the thorns of culture? I hope we are mostly like a young girl who under pressure stood for God and shared God's grace with those in her world. I pray that God will so touch us with grace that the light of Jesus will shine through us and others will be drawn to the one true God.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.