

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2022

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
LUKE 17:1-11

GOD'S HEALING GOES BEYOND ALL BOUNDARIES

If you heard from someone that God's healing power can be manifested not just by a spectacular, dazzling, dramatic show but by obedience to a command so simple that a child could easily do it, would you believe it? If you were told that the crucial, *powerful* person in that wondrous healing was the *lowest status* person in the story, would you believe *that*? If you heard that God's healing had come to the pagan commander of military forces which had invaded the nation which considered itself to be God's chosen people, *and* that he had been converted to be a worshiper of God as a result, would you believe, treasure and pass on the story, or dismiss it as too preposterous, too "out of the box", too "unpatriotic," too challenging to what people might have assumed about God?

Today's story from the Hebrew Scriptures, like a good number of biblical stories, is remarkably pertinent to *this* moment in history. This is a moment when political polarization is talked about endlessly. We have here a story about bridge-building between mortal enemies. This is a moment when women around the world are demanding to be listened to — including, in Iran, risking their lives in so doing. We have here a story with the game-changing direct quote coming from a *girl* who lived 2,900 years ago. This is a moment when extremist Christian nationalism dominates the Russian government and is a dangerous force in America as well. We have here a story that rebuts all that. Let's do a deep dive into it.

Fact can be stranger than fiction. And the story I'm referring to is not one about Jesus, although his ministry (2,000 years ago *and* today) also exhibited and exhibits the same features. The story we just heard read as the Old Testament reading *was* one Jesus cited (Luke 4:27), along with the prophet Elijah promising food to the pagan, foreign widow of Zarephath, to challenge the ethnocentric assumptions Jesus' co-religionists in Nazareth had about God. Luke reports that "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built so that they might hurl him off the cliff."

What got the faithful, regular worshipers of the LORD in Nazareth *so* angry? Let's find out.

We go back in time to the mid-9th Century B.C., early in the ministry of the great prophet Elisha who was heir to the prophet Elijah. Elijah's ministry had spectacular ups and downs. In today's story, we hear how God employs the great prophet Elisha to do something profound and spectacular in a very *undramatic* way.

After the death of King Solomon, the Israelites were divided into two countries, Judah in the south of the Holy Land, based around Jerusalem, and Israel in the north of the Holy Land with its capital in Samaria.

Both nations were *very* small powers in the geo-politics of the ancient Middle East, which is important to know for this story. Historically, whoever lived in the Holy Land was perpetually vulnerable to invasion by either or both of the nations which *were* Great Powers in the ancient Middle East: Egypt, and whoever controlled what are the modern-day countries of Iraq and Syria.

Korea has been invaded repeatedly by either China or Japan, Poland has been invaded repeatedly by Russia or Germany, and little Belgium has been a "speed bump" for the invading armies of either Germany or France. Ninth Century B.C. Israel had all of the power and security of Belgium.

Luckily for Israel at the time of Elisha, the whole area of what are now Syria and Iraq was not united under one aggressive ruler; that would happen in the following century. There *were* chronic wars between Israel and the pagan nation of Aram (in modern-day Syria), and our story opens with the narrator's astonishing declaration that through Naaman, the commander of the the army of the King of Aram, *the LORD* had given victory to *Aram* in the latest conflict.

Anyone who assumes that God is simply a cheerleader for a particular country or is the "ultimate big brother" who beats up kids on the playground who pick on his anointed one has their assumptions challenged right there. And the narrator says that this foreign, pagan general who with God's help has been successfully attacking Israel has leprosy, so anyone who assumes that being favored by God means you'll never have any problems has *that* assumption blown away as well. "Stuff happens" to all sorts of people.

Next, we are introduced to the crucial, powerful person upon whom the whole story pivots. Now, in ancient times (and in too many places today), women had much lower status than men, and children much lower status than adults. How much status did a *girl* who was a *slave* and a Prisoner of War have? Can't get much lower than that, according to *human* standards.

God ignores human standards.

This girl is *empowered and guided* by God to *witness to her faith* — and not in the way you might expect, like praying, “Dear God, please get me out of here, let me go home, and please clobber the Arameans while you’re at it.” I probably would have prayed like that in her situation, but not her. Instead, she seeks *healing* for the person who captured and enslaved her. Now, who said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?” Yeah, that was Jesus — 900 years later. This girl has a personal relationship with God that gives her, in effect, an advance copy of the Sermon on the Mount 900 years before Jesus — and she lives it out.

Naaman’s wife, to whom the girl speaks, to her credit doesn’t “blow off” this outlandish idea that her husband might seek healing in, of all places, Israel. General Naaman himself is willing to give it a try, and talks his own king into sending him to the Israelite capital city of Samaria under a flag of truce with a handsome thank you present for the King of Israel in whose hands, the King of Aram assumes, lies the power of Israel’s God to heal. (*Lots of assumptions take a beating in this story.*) The King of Israel understandably freaks out and thinks this is the strangest set-up to pick a fight he’s ever heard of.

It does not, however, occur to the King of Israel to send General Naaman to the prophet Elisha. The slave girl/P.O.W. knows more about how God works than does her own king! Just another “subversive” message in this biblical passage. Someone in the court of the King of Israel is similarly acute, gets word to Elisha, and Elisha sends a message to his own king to have General Naaman come to *him* “So that he [Naaman] may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” Elisha thinks General Naaman is a better prospect for “getting it” than is the King of Israel — and of course, Elisha is right.

Sometimes God demonstrates his power in big, spectacular ways: plagues in Egypt, Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Elijah’s victory over the 400 prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. But God is not limited. Sometimes, God demonstrates God’s power — and care — by *getting someone to take a bath*. Can you get more prosaic than that?

General Naaman pulls up in front of Elijah’s house in his stretch limo with the Aramean flag flying from one front fender and the flag of a four star general flying from the other front fender, all his aides and supporting cast in vehicles behind him, *and* a truck load of “bling” to give to the prophet as a “tip.”

Elisha, however, not only does not put on a pyrotechnic show like his predecessor Elijah, he doesn’t even come to the door to talk to General Naaman in person, but sends a messenger to tell him to take a bath...seven times...in the Jordan River.

General Naaman has a tantrum. *This* is not what *he* expected from this strange god's even stranger disciple. He is *so* important he deserves the whole "son et lumiere" show. And certainly *his* country's rivers have just as much healing power as Israel's, if not more. General Naaman's wiser *servants* get him to calm down and focus on his desired *outcome*, not the methodology. They get the idea that this weird prophet might just be in touch with some holy healing power which doesn't need special effects in order to work.

Naaman is a practical man who likes results. To be fair, he has also by this time humbled himself a lot by going to Israel for healing in the first place, and now by going to this unpretentious holy man far away from the royal court. Might as well do what he says.

And Naaman is healed.

The excerpt from this story we heard today ends, "Then [General Naaman] returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.'"

The commanding general of Israel's enemy calls himself a "servant" of the prophet Elisha, declares his conversion to the exclusive worship of the LORD, and wants to make and pay his pledge, thus refuting the assumption of some that new converts and newcomers in general won't be generous. Elisha, however, declines a personal gift.

Naaman then asks for, and receives, two mule-loads of the local dirt so that he can lay it out as the floor of a private chapel for himself back home, enabling him to worship the LORD *literally* on Israelite *soil*, a nice, homely touch.

Finally, Naaman asks Elisha's pardon for his literally having to continue to "go through the motions" of pagan worship back home because he goes into the King's temple to worship on the arm of the King of Aram, who is a pagan. Elisha understands this, and says, "Go in peace." Go in peace to serve *the LORD*, General.

This story, like all of the others involving Elijah and Elisha, was carefully preserved by *southern* scribes in Judah even *after* the complete and utter destruction of the country of Israel in 721 B.C., and then through the exile in Babylon and to this day, through many times when "love your enemies" was not a popular idea.

This is a story about power, about faith, and about belonging. God gives power to a slave girl P.O.W., to God's prophet, and to an enemy general who becomes a convert. No one is "too unlikely" a prospect for deep conversion. As Jesus would later say, the "seed" is scattered widely, even in places which look unpromising to *people*, because

only *God* knows what is truly the “good soil” in which God’s word can take root and flourish. And we learn from this story, as from the stories of Jonah and Ruth, ***no one is a foreigner to God***, and God’s mercy knows *no* national boundaries.

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