

Pentecost 7, Proper 9, Year C  
July 7, 2013  
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and sanctifier. Amen.

Good morning! I really love this morning's lesson from Hebrew scripture because it is such fun to tell! There's a simple, stereotypical plot line with very stereotypical characters and a semi-surprising happily-ever-after ending. What more could we ask for?! So here goes...

The lesson today from 2 Kings begins with our introduction to a man named Naaman - a great man - a great warrior - sort of like a four-star general - head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff - and a man in high favor with the King of Aram, an area near Israel also known as Syria. Naaman was known as such a great man because earlier the Lord helped him defeat the kingdom of Israel.

In spite of being such a great man, Naaman, like the rest of us, had his troubles. He had what the scripture calls leprosy. Since he was a strong, energetic warrior, though, it's likely that Naaman did not have the debilitating disease that created horrible sores on one's skin and caused one's fingers and toes to fall off. Instead, it was probably something like eczema or 'the heartbreak of psoriasis.' At any rate, there would have been a social stigma associated with any chronic skin condition in the ancient Near East. So Naaman must have really been a great warrior to have been able to overcome his condition and become such an important person in Aram.

In his household was a young Israelite girl who was carried off from her home as part of the spoils of war with Israel and became a servant to Naaman's wife. She told her mistress about a prophet in Israel who could help Naaman with his condition. The mistress told her husband about the prophet; Naaman told the king. The king said, "You should go. I'll write a letter of introduction to the King of Israel for you and ask him for help." So he loaded up some gold and silver and other gifts and off he went.

When he got to Israel, Naaman presented himself and the letter of recommendation to the king. The letter read 'when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' Well, the

king was beside himself! He wasn't a healer! Surely this was a trick on the part of the king of Aram in order to start a war.

You know, that whole chain of events was like the old game we used to play called 'Telephone.' Do you remember it? Everyone sits in a circle and the first person whispers a message to the next person and it goes around the circle with no repeating, and then the last person in the circle tells everyone the message, which is usually very wrong.

In this case, the servant girl said to the wife, 'the prophet Elisha can heal.' By the time it got from the wife to Naaman to the king to the letter to the other king, it became 'the king can heal.' And things kept going from there: the king immediately assumed the worst of the first king; he didn't check it out, so he decided that something devious and low was going on.

This could've gotten bad in a hurry, but Elisha stepped in, probably preventing a war. He invited Naaman to come to his house for healing. So Naaman came. But the fireworks weren't over yet.

When Naaman got to Elisha's house, the prophet did not come out to greet him or even look him over. Instead, he just sent a servant out with a message, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be restored and you shall be clean."

Naaman couldn't take it. He pictured himself instantly cured as the prophet performed suitable rituals. He also questioned the idea that a river in Israel might have more curative properties than rivers in his native Syria. None of this was happening in a way appropriate for a man of his station in life. So he turned it all down, and in a huff, Naaman took his gold and his other gifts and went away in a rage.

Naaman is like the man in the old joke who is caught in a flood and goes up on the roof, where he intends to wait until God comes to rescue him. Person after person comes by in a rowboat, offering to take him to safety. Then a helicopter appears, offering the same help. "No, thanks," he says. "I know God's going to save me." Finally the waters rise over him and he dies. When he gets to the pearly gates, he complains, "I prayed and prayed, but you didn't save me!" And God answers, "Well, I sent you four rowboats and a helicopter!"

But once again, servants intervened and were able to prevail. They said, "Look, Master, if the prophet had asked you to do some great feat, you would have done it. Your problem is your pride; all he did was say, 'Wash and be clean.' Can you not do this simple thing?"

So, Naaman calmed down and listened to his servants and went to the Jordan and immersed himself seven times and he was cleansed and healed. And, in the last verse of this story, which is inexplicably left out of the reading for today, Naaman acknowledges the full authority of Israel's God. And, to ensure that he can give proper thanks to the Lord when he returns to Damascus, he gets permission from Elisha to bring back two mule-loads of local soil - a piece of Israel upon which to give thanks to the one who washed him clean.

What the great man Naaman did was, for him, a very difficult thing: he humbled himself. He put aside his pride and his prejudice and his preconceived notions and he decided to trust. Now, Naaman didn't trust God, because he didn't know God. And he didn't trust Elisha because he didn't know Elisha either. But he had learned to trust his servants, and with that small sliver of faith - he was healed.

All of us need healing. All of us have places of brokenness and weakness. No matter how great or rich or powerful or successful we may be, we all have blemishes and shortcomings. None of us is perfect and all of us need to be healed of something.

How will that happen?

God still speaks in and from the most unexpected places and through the most unexpected people -- prophets in their own right, really. Perhaps it's a word of possibility and hope, like the words of the young slave girl. Perhaps it's a word of clear command, like the instruction from Elisha, that supplies a reality check on our own sense of importance when we've gotten a little carried away with ourselves. Or perhaps it's a word of persuasive reasoning spoken for our own good -- a word that redirects us and puts us on the right path toward healing and wholeness.

What we can see is that in these words from God, in all situations and from whatever source, however unexpected, however ordinary, in these words from God are the movement and the power of compassion in our lives. God's healing comes from surprising places and in most unanticipated ways, but it comes nevertheless.

And you and I, along with "nameless servants" and "mighty generals" all the same, are free to move into the river, step into the deep waters of God's own care, and emerge restored and renewed. Let's pray for the good sense and the good grace to say yes when we hear those words, no matter the source, and to know God's healing in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.