

“So He Went Down”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park

July 4, 2010

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. (2 Kings 5:1-14)

What a fascinating story to hear on this special day! As our first lesson today, we have a remarkably and provocative story, with a well-developed plot and a rich cast of characters, including kings and a chief military commander. The story unfolds some three thousand years ago, in the 9th century before Christ, to be a little more specific. But, I think it could have happened anytime, anywhere, especially here and now, in the twenty-first century America. Many interesting details in the story remind me of the issues with which we now struggle, as individuals, as well as as a community and as a nation. The context certainly is not the same. But when I hear the king of Israel grumble in verse 7, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?", I cannot help but think of our ailing health care system. I am particularly touched by Dr. Andre Hines's witness today. I am grateful

that her agency, Circle Family HealthCare Network, is determined not to send anyone away, but to provide health care to all, especially to those most in need.

Our story begins with Naaman, the chief military commander of the Aramean army. We are told that he was a great man, a great general. He brought victories to his country, Aram, Israel's northern neighbor. You know, these two countries were frequently at war. With Naaman as its chief commander, Aram seemed to have the better army. Our text tells us that the Aramean army had beaten up on Israel more than once.

Yet, in spite of all his accomplishments and greatness, Naaman had a problem. He suffered from a terrible skin disease. Our text calls it leprosy, a disease that carried with it a social stigma and was associated with death. Imagine a national hero, with all the power and wealth to which a person could aspire, and yet, unable to get what he needed the most. I bet he had tried whatever cure available back then. Then he heard from his wife, who heard from one of her slaves, a little Hebrew girl captured in one of his raids, that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal him from his disease.

How foolish! How preposterous! Hearsay from a slave girl! What would you have done if you were Naaman? Well, Naaman was desperate. He could not afford to leave any stone unturned.

He talked to his king, who was kind enough to write a letter of introduction to his counterpart in Israel. A nice gesture on the part of the king of Aram, but a gesture which will give occasion to some serious misconceptions for the king of Israel. The latter will think that the former is picking a fight with him. How ironic! And how real! How often do we make wrong judgments regarding other people's behaviors, because we do not see, or because we undervalue, situational factors? I just love this story, so full of interesting details and keen insights! But we will need another lesson or another sermon for that. Today, I think we'd rather stick with the main plot.

So, loaded with extravagant gifts, Naaman set out for Samaria, the capital of Israel. There he presents the letter to the king, but, as we already know, the clueless king is suspicious, fearful, and distressed.

This is when Elisha, the prophet about whom the little Hebrew slave girl talked, appears in the story, although not physically. Hearing the king's distress, Elisha sends a message to the king: *"Let him come to me."*

So, Naaman, with his horses and chariots, arrives in style and stops at Elisha's door. I am sure that it was a spectacle not to be missed. Not only Naaman, but also the entire town, had their eyes fixed on that door, expecting a stylish welcome and a stylish miracle, something worthy of Naaman's status, a dramatic and impressive cure.

But then, the door opens and out comes a servant. *"Go, wash in the Jordan seven times,"* says the servant to Naaman. *"What?"* Naaman is furious. Turning on his heels, he says, *"Are not the rivers in Damascus cleaner than any of the rivers in Israel?"*

He was desperate enough to come to Israel. But now, it was too much. The doctor does not even come out to see him, but sends out an assistant with a shabby prescription? His personal ego is wounded and his national pride injured. For Naaman, it was too much, too, too, too much. But not so for his servants. They approached and talked to him. Why not give this embarrassingly simple cure a try?

I already told you that I loved this story, and here is another reason. In this story, masters do not know what to do. The kings do not know what to do. But the servants do. They

know where to find the healing power; they know what do to be made whole. Yes, they know better. And they tell their masters where to go and what to do.

I give credit to Naaman for listening to his servants. I believe it to be the beginning of his cure. Listening to a slave girl, he came down to Israel. Listening to his servants, he went down to the Jordan River. His power had gotten him nowhere. His wealth had gotten him nowhere. His royal connections, his fame, and his success had gotten him nowhere. But when he listened to his servants, and went down to Israel and then to the Jordan, when he immersed himself deeply into that muddy river, he emerged healed and restored. He was given a new skin and a new life.

You see? God's healing comes from surprising places. God's salvation comes in unexpected ways. God works through lowly servants and muddy rivers. God works in the heart of the proud and powerful, not only humbling them but also healing them.

When we hear a voice saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan", may we have the grace to say yes, no matter the source! Along with Naaman and his nameless servants, may we have the grace to know God's healing in our lives! Let the congregation say, Amen!