

“Go, Wash in the Jordan”

Meditation on 2 Kings 5:1-14

July 3, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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, was a leper. 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

(dipped) 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

Jim and I watched one of my favorite movies this week-- "The Princess Bride." The 1987 classic begins with an elderly man reading the fairy tale, "The Princess Bride," to his young grandson, home sick from school. At first, the boy can't tear himself away from his video game to listen to the tale, but he becomes more interested after his grandpa promises "sports" in the story-- "fencing, fighting, torture, murder, pirates, revenge, true love and miracles."

Once upon a time, a beautiful maiden, Buttercup, and Wesley, a poor farm boy, fall in love. He leaves the village to find his fortune, planning to return and marry her. But the Dread Pirate Roberts attacks Wesley's ship, Buttercup learns, leaving no survivors. She grieves and vows to never love again. Then, evil Prince Humperdink, chooses Buttercup to be his wife. But he hires 3 men --Inigo, Vizzini, and Fezzik--to start a war by kidnapping and killing her and blaming another kingdom for her death. Wesley, who masquerades as the Dread Pirate Roberts, returns just in time to save Buttercup. But the Prince captures him and sends him to be tortured in the Pit of Despair. Inigo and Fezzik go looking for Wesley to help them avenge Inigo's father, who was killed 20 years before by a 6-fingered man. They find Wesley, but he's already dead. Not giving up, they take him to Miracle Max, and give him all the money they have (which isn't much) to restore him to life. Max agrees when he learns that it will mean humiliation for Humperdink, who fired Max.

Max and his wife, Valerie (Carol Kane), make a magic pill for Inigo and Fezzik to give to Wesley. "The chocolate coating makes it down easier," Valerie says. "But you have to wait 15 minutes for full potency...And you shouldn't go in swimming after at least..." "An hour," Max finishes. "Have fun storming the castle!" they say, waving to Inigo, Fezzik and the still unconscious Wesley. Valerie asks Max, "Do you think it'll work?" Max says, "It'll take a miracle." But everything works out perfectly, because it's a fairy tale. After some adventures and misadventures, Buttercup is saved from the evil prince. The miracle pill restores Wesley's health. Inigo's father is avenged. Buttercup and Wesley and their friends ride off into the sunset--to live happily ever after.

A miracle is what the great Aramean warrior, Naaman, needs in our reading in 2 Kings today. What is startling, right away, is learning that the one who desires healing and seeks it in Israel's God is Israel's archenemy. Naaman, which means "fair" or "gracious," is the commander of the army of Aram, also called Syria. Aram was one of Noah's grandsons and one of Shem's sons (Gen. 10-11). The two kingdoms that are almost continually in conflict are experiencing a rare peace when the "young girl" captured in a raid from "the land of Israel" and made to serve Naaman's wife wants to help the one responsible for her capture and enslavement! She is the one who has faith in the God of Israel and God's prophet Elisha--not the king of Israel. We don't know exactly when this miracle took place, since neither the king of Aram

(Syria) or Israel is identified.

Naaman is called “a leper,” but we aren’t sure what his skin disease actually was--or its severity. He doesn’t appear to be suffering from the “leprosy” that is known today as Hansen’s disease, which causes pain, widespread infection of the joints, eventual loss of limbs and gross disfigurement. He is not forced to live in quarantine. He isn’t ritually unclean or subject to the regulations of Lev. 13. Naaman learns of Elisha in Samaria indirectly from his wife, who listens to her young servant. Naaman, without hesitation, it seems, approaches his king with this information and the king of Aram, writes a letter for Naaman to take to the king of Israel. Strangely, the king of Aram fails to mention the prophet in the letter, and the king of Israel doesn’t turn to Elisha for help. The king of Israel immediately jumps to the wrong conclusion, believing that the Syrian king is looking for an excuse to go to war.

Let’s consider the gift Naaman brings. One talent is about 32 kilograms; a shekel weighs about 30 milligrams. Naaman’s total gift would amount to about 340 kilograms of silver (about 749 pounds) and 90 kilograms (198 pounds) of gold. This is an enormous amount!! He would need an army of horses and chariots to carry this gift! This speaks of Naaman’s great wealth, his determination not to be ignored, his great desire to be healed, and his willingness to pay a steep price for it.

Naaman’s request and the king’s fearful response somehow reach Elisha, who is probably still in Gilgal (where he was in ch. 4) with his students. Elisha sends a messenger to the king, saying, “Let him come to me that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” Naaman, with his

parade of horses and chariots and silver and gold, goes to Elisha's house, but Elisha isn't there! There's only a messenger, who says, "Go wash in the Jordan 7 times!" This is not the reception or cure that the mighty warrior expected, desired, or felt he deserved. He wants a miracle like Miracle Max --a chocolate-coated, magic pill--so that he can have life, just as he imagines it to be without his disease. "Washing" in the Jordan is an insult to Naaman, who is quick to defend the rivers of his homeland. But this healing isn't just about Naaman being cured of disease--it is about his being brought to the faith--his conversion to belief in the gracious, merciful God of Israel. Elisha sends him to the Jordan because of its significance for Israel-- who crossed it to enter God's Promised Land. Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan together before the Lord took Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. In the New Testament, John will call sinners to repentance in the Jordan. Jesus will be baptized there to show us the way.

Just like at the beginning of today's passage in 2 Kings, we find, at the end, that those with great faith and wisdom are those with the lowest status! When the mighty warrior turns away from Elisha's messenger in a rage, his servants muster the courage to approach and ask, *'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"?'* The miracle is that Naamann listens--and his heart is moved to obey. He immerses or "dips" himself in the Jordan 7 times--and his healing is complete. The verb translated "immerse" or "dip" is unusual in the Old Testament, often referring to objects dipped in blood. Even when it refers to objects dipped in water (such as 2 Kings 8:15) or in

other liquids (Deut. 33:24 and 1 Sam. 14:27), it is not a synonym for “washing.” His flesh is “restored like the flesh of a young boy”-- language that brings us back to the young, innocent child at the beginning of his story, caught between the two warring kingdoms--the Israeli slave who stirred Naaman to search for his cleansing of body and *soul*, though he didn’t know it at the time. What Naaman needed more than anything was to be made *whole*.

Friends, we may be tempted to approach God like he’s Miracle Max in a fairy tale, wanting the magic, chocolate-coated pill that goes down easy and sweet--so everything can be how **we** want it to be--perhaps as things used to be, when we were younger. And we can be prideful and stubborn like Naaman--and stop listening to God’s word because it isn’t what we want to hear. We may end up making things more difficult for ourselves than they have to be. We may even miss out on the healing work God has planned for us and the opportunity to witness to God’s amazing power--and our own obedience to him.

After Naaman is healed, he returns to “the man of God,” in verse 15, and stands before him with all his horses and chariots and men. And Naaman says, “Now I know...” “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, save for Israel.” Naaman’s extravagant gifts are not needed. The Lord’s gift of wholeness--body and soul--is not something that can be bought or earned. But God’s mercy and grace should stir a heart-felt response in us, as Naaman’s healing does for him. The mighty warrior and former enemy of Israel vows to build an altar in his homeland of Aram so that he can worship and serve the One True God. Think of the witness that this man of great reputation will have in enemy territory!

Think of all the conversions and healings that will come!

The words of the prophet stir us today to recall our baptisms, when we first tasted the Spirit-filled life and began to listen for God's voice. Let us heed God's call to love and serve with fresh commitment, not expecting a fairy tale life and "happily ever after" but simply to live in grateful obedience to the Lord. "Go, wash in the Jordan! Wash and be *made whole!*"

Let us pray.

Holy One, thank you for your Spirit that continues to fill us, guide us, and wash us clean from all our sins! Thank you for our baptisms and for the way you continually respond to our cries for healing--and your desire to make us whole. Father, we are in need of your healing now for our bodies and souls! Forgive us for our stubbornness and pride wanting you to work in us and our lives the way we want you to do. Humble us and make us grateful for the miracles we experience and witness every day. Stir us to respond with loving service to you and your people, like the lowly servants in your Word. In Christ we pray. Amen.