

The Bethel Pulpit – Pastor Scot Sorensen

February 12, 2012 – Epiphany 6

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text – 2 Kings 5:1-14 SERMON- “ Advice & Consent”

For those waiting to hear a word about my recent travels with 24 other wonderful people from Bethel down to Dorado, Puerto Rico with our sister parish, that will be next week. Next week is Transfiguration Sunday, and I will share stories of the personal transformations from Puerto Rico in light of the transfiguration of Jesus and transformation of the disciples of next week’s Gospel text.

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I know it is more than trite to say that God works in mysterious ways, but our Lesson from 2 Kings for today is a fairly convincing argument of that truth.

THE SETTING. After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two small nations; Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This division took place around 940 BC. Our story for today takes place about 100 years after the kingdom was divided, around 840 BC in the northern Kingdom of Israel. At this time Israel was getting routinely harassed by their more powerful northern neighbor Aram, which is today Syria. There was no love lost between Aram and Israel,

The four principle characters in the story are 1) the King of Israel - his name is Joram though he is not mentioned by name; 2) the king of Aram; 3) the military leader for the Arameans, a man named Naaman; and 4) the prophet Elisha, not to be confused with the prophet Elijah. Besides our four principle characters there were also key roles played by servants who guided the action of the story by their advice.

With that background, let’s look at the story.

We begin outside of Israel, in Aram, with Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram. There are two important points to remember about Naaman. One, the scriptures tell us that Naaman had found favor in the sight of the king because, and this is curious; the LORD had given victory to Aram. Naaman was where he was, a powerful figure in the court of Israel's most feared neighbor, he was where he was because God's intervention put him there. Naaman was totally unaware of the Lord's help. The other key point to remember about Naaman is that despite his military and political might, he suffered from leprosy and was simultaneously feared and respected, yet isolated from all others.

As I already said, to say that God works in mysterious ways is an understatement when it comes to deciphering this story. There was a young Israelite girl who was taken prisoner, and made a slave during one of the raids of the Arameans into Israel. I am certain that this poor girl’s family did not see the hand of God in her being taken as a

slave and separated from her family, her home and her God. God always has a bigger picture in mind.

This Israelite slave girl was forced to work in the service of Naaman. She was indeed God's hand at work. She saw that her master had leprosy. So she went to the mistress of the house, her boss Naaman's wife, and told her that there is a prophet in Israel who could cure Naaman of his leprosy.

Desperate men will resort to desperate measures, so when Naaman heard the news, he was ready to try anything. He went and told the King of Aram what the slave girl from Israel had said. The king gave orders for Naaman to go to Israel with a formal letter of request.

Curious, don't you think, that kings of nations end up doing the very will of God because of a slave girl who knows and speaks the truth. Wisdom was not found in the halls of governmental power, but in the words and advice of a slave girl. The powerful army commander took advice from a foreign slave girl.

Naaman headed south to Israel loaded with a caravan of gifts; ten talents of silver, roughly 500K dollars’ worth, six thousand shekels of gold which in modern gold equivalents is about 800K dollars’ worth of gold. So we are at \$1.3 million as payment for this miracle health cure. Along with the cash Naaman brought along “ten sets of garments”, the equivalent to the men's department of Nordstrom’s. Carrying all this wealth in anticipation of being healed of leprosy, Naaman brings his king's letter to the king of Israel.

The letter reads: "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 was in a panic. He was sure it was some kind of political trick. After all, the commander of his enemies’ army has shown up at his doors with an enormous amount of gifts in order to buy a miracle. A miracle cure that would only strengthen his enemy. Things are not looking good for Israel's king. He was probably fairly certain that death would be coming swift and soon. With the letter in his hands he shouts, "Am I god, to give death or life? You ask of me to cure leprosy? Only God can do that. He is trying to start a war with me!" The king of Israel wailed in anguish.

Again, divine providence was at work. News of the king’s spectacle, as well as the arrival of the infamous and dreaded Naaman reached Elisha. He too, replied in a letter, for this was certainly not important enough for Elisha to leave his home. The letter was a simple rebuke, reply, and solution. "Why are you so upset? Send the Aramean to me, that he may learn that there is indeed a mighty God who has a prophet in Israel." So Naaman left the palace and went with his entire entourage to Elisha's house.

Now, I have always wondered about Elisha’s neighbors. Nowhere does it record the reaction of Elisha's

neighbors. You know, the folks who lived across the street from Elisha. What was their reaction to seeing a foreign army walk up their street a foreign army complete with pack animal after pack animal loaded with gifts? Can't you just see them closing the blinds, and peeking around corners to both hide and see what was going on all at the same time? It must have been quite a sight!

Unaffected by this display of might, wealth and power, Elisha himself sent a messenger, a servant out to the mighty Naaman with a message, "Go to the river Jordan and wash yourself seven times, and your skin will be restored and you shall be clean."

When Naaman saw the little messenger, and heard the words, he was furious. Kids today would say that he had been "dissed." The mighty army general had been publicly embarrassed, at least he thought so. In furious anger he turned to go away, roaring as he left, "I thought surely that for me, the prophet would come outside and call on the name of the LORD his God. That he would wave his arms and say magic words and the leprosy would be healed! No. He tells me to go and wash in the River Jordan. Have you seen the Jordan River? It is a pathetic excuse for a river. More like a creek than a river. Why, if I were going to wash in a river I would do it in a real river, like one of the rivers we have at home. The Abana and Pharpar, those are mighty rivers! Couldn't I just wash in them and be clean?!" Naaman left in a rage. I can see the chariot wheels spraying gravel everywhere.

Yet again, a servant of Naaman goes to him with these words of advice. "Master, if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? Why are you upset because he asks you to do something as simple and as easy as to bathe in a river?"

Naaman is not the first, nor the last to be frustrated when God makes a simple request. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. All who believe and are baptized shall be saved. Grace comes free, and we are not always quite certain what to do with it. It all seems too easy

Naaman did not get to the high position he was by NOT listening to good advice. And as all lepers he was, by definition, desperate for a cure. So, he went to the Jordan and dipped himself seven times in that muddy water. And by the time he came up after the seventh time, his skin was like the skin of a young man. He was clean, cured, healed.

Once more Naaman came with the whole entourage to Elisha's house. Only this time, Naaman got down from his chariot and went to Elisha and proclaimed, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Then Naaman tried to give his fortune of gifts to Elisha as payment for the miracle. But Elisha would have none of it.

"The Lord lives and is mighty as you say, but God's gifts are not for sale." I cannot accept these gifts.

Naaman's status and gifts were completely ignored. God's healing was not for sale any more than God's prophet. Everybody knows you can't wash away leprosy, no matter how many baths you take. Leprosy is leprosy. It doesn't just wash away. Naaman's conclusion was inescapable. This was more than the power of the River Jordan, more than the power of the holy man he had never seen. This was God, and

Namaan had met God. This was a god different from the gods Naaman was accustomed to. This god did not respond to bribes or threats. This God gave freely, without bargain or pressure. This God gave, not the way people give, but in the unique way God gives.

Then Naaman countered, "If you will not accept my gifts, then would it be acceptable if I were to take two mule-loads of Israel dirt back to Aram with me? I will no longer give offerings to any god except the Lord." Understand that gods were associated with the land. Naaman, as would most of the people in 840 BC, thought that in order to worship the Lord God of Israel, you had to be in Israel to worship God. Since Naaman lived in Syria, he would take a pile of Israel dirt, dump it on the ground when he got home, set up a crude altar on that bit of dirt, and there he could offer his sacrifices to God. It was a nice sentiment, but the theory was all wrong. God was not bound to the dirt of Israel. Remember, the story began by telling us that Naaman's rise to power had been through the Lord's hand; it is just that Naaman never knew it.

Elisha had the good sense to stay indoors and not even be part of Naaman's "Big man to big man" encounter. The general could then clearly see that it was God, not Elisha who was doing the healing.

So what do we have?

1) God works in mysterious ways. God was in work in the life of Naaman, the Israelite slave girl, the king of Aram. God is at work in ways that we cannot understand, and, God is at work in the lives of people whom we might classify as enemies! Outsiders!

2) Miracles aren't for sale. What Naaman wanted to buy, namely God's favor, is not for sale. God gives. Naaman came prepared to barter, to haggle, to hassle with the divine intermediary and finally was willing to pay dearly for his healing. Poor Naaman didn't get to do any of that, because what he wanted was free. He came to drive a hard bargain and prided himself on his ability to do just that. Ah, but miracles aren't for sale. You see, God gives!

3) Naaman's general misconception was that grace came too easy. If it is this easy, this free, then surely it can't be worth much. Elisha and Jesus, offend our sensibilities with this deep love, this cleansing grace. We think we want it to be more difficult. Make me jump through hoops. I'm used to that. Make me do decades of service to be worthy of such love. Make me do something, anything other than this, THIS giving of grace and healing.

Yes, it is all too easy for Naaman and he is offended. And we too are often offended by Jesus who loves us so fully, so completely, so without strings and without demands, so unconditionally.

God gives. And when we come to that blessed realization, we come at a gallop to God's door in thankful praise and celebration. We come like Naaman after he was healed, we come running like the one leper who returned to give thanks. We run back to the God who gives - the God who gives not only healing, but life and faith and joy - ABUNDANTLY!!

A thankful heart is a heart willing to give to God our whole life. Amen. © 2012