

2 Kings 5:9-19

**Morning Prayer homily delivered to the Synod of the Episcopal Missionary Church
October 22, 2010**

Our lectionary readings from Morning Prayer have had us in the Second Book of the Kings for a few days now. And our lessons have centered around the works and miracles of the great prophet Elisha. And this morning's Old Testament lesson is a continuation of these miracle stories.

As our reading opens, we have Naaman the Syrian dismounting from his chariot with his entourage with him, his attendants...and he stands at the door of Elisha's home. Now, we learned from yesterday's morning lesson that Naaman was a great and honorable man – a captain, in fact, of the armies of the king of Syria. He was a man noted for his might and valor. But Naaman had one problem – he was a leper.

Now, Naaman would not have know anything about Elisha the prophet were it not for a little Israelite maiden that had been captured in one of the Syrian raids and brought back as a servant for his wife (Naaman's wife). And one day this young maiden shows her faith, and speaks up and says, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria. For he would heal him of his leprosy." And so, word gets back to Naaman that this little Israelite girl, the most unlikely of people, had mentioned this. And one thing leads to another and Naaman goes to visit this prophet Elisha.

And so there stands Naaman in his military regalia, with his attendants, his chariot and horses, and Elisha sends a messenger to him and says, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be made clean." Now I think it is safe to say that Naaman was used to a little better reception than this! He was captain of the armies of Syria. He was like what we would think of as a "Five-Star General" these days. People would generally bend over backwards for someone of his rank and position. He was, in his own mind, not received with due deference.

And so Naaman becomes furious! He flies into a rage, and says (and this is great from the King James), “Behold, I thought...” Naaman thinks to himself, “I thought he would come out and call on his God, and wave his hand over the place and heal the Leprosy!” Naaman either expected something more spectacular than what he was told, or something much more simple and immediate perhaps. But instead he was told to go to a muddy river in Israel to wash – not very appealing from Naaman’s point of view. You see, Naaman’s disease was not his only problem. He also had a problem with his pride, and it was touched in this encounter with Elisha.

Interestingly, Naaman’s attendants speak reason to him and convince him to go ahead and wash in the Jordan. After all, he had come all that way...he may as well give it a go and see what happens. So he does and when Naaman walks out of the river Jordan his flesh is completely healed – completely healed. Naaman returns to Elisha convinced that there is only one God, the God of Israel.

So, what are we to do with this story this morning? The Church Fathers see in this story a foreshadowing of the healing granted by the Lord to all nations, the Gentiles. Naaman is a type of the Gentiles and Elisha a type of Christ. They see in this story a pre-figuring of the Sacrament of Baptism.

But the question for us this morning as we reflect on this story is, “What is its meaning for us as clergymen in Christ’s Church?” Is there a specific lesson here for us in our unique calling? And I believe that there is.

We as priests in Christ’s Church are in the business (if you will) of the “cure of souls” or the “care of souls.” In a sense, we stand in the place of Elisha the prophet in this story, and we have before us those who are in need of healing. We all know that leprosy in Scripture is treated as a type of sin and death. And every Christian, but certainly us in our unique calling do the work of a prophet, that is, we send people to that which heals. For Elisha, it was sending Naaman to the Jordan river. For us, it is pointing people to Jesus Christ, the Great Physician and Healer.

While being used in this capacity in the Church, we have the obligation not to get in the way, or to think more of ourselves than we ought. We all, after all, only the vessels. Perhaps this is why Elisha is a bit aloof in his dealing with Naaman. Maybe Naaman would have gotten the conduit of the cure confused with the cure itself.

But like Elisha we are a means of the Divine cure. And we stand in this beautiful and rich Anglican tradition, with the fullness of the Christian heritage available to us.

This, of course, is a time when many are wondering if there is a better way to go about this Divine work – perhaps we ought to re-invent the wheel after all. But I would remind you that Naaman thought to himself, “If I’m going to go washing in a river, there are better rivers back home. The Abana and the Pharpar are much better...” But it was the washing in the Jordan through which God healed him. Indeed, when it comes to the “leprosy of the soul” we stand in a great healing tradition, and we should honor it.

That we have been called with this holy calling should humble us to our core, and at the same time drive us to go into our respective communities with boldness because we are the bearers, like Elisha, of such precious, healing, good news.

And indeed, the Gospel is what this story is all about. From the little Israelite maiden (a most unexpected place), comes the life-giving word, that when acted upon by Naaman, results in his healing. And this is essentially the gospel story and message. May we carry it to a world that so desperately needs it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit +