

6th Sunday after Epiphany

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

February 15, 2009

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

“As Easy As It Seems”

Today's lesson from 2nd Kings is a fun story. It's one of many in scripture that are good for a chuckle. It has engaging characters, international intrigue, and finally a denouncement that is just pure fun. It is one more affirmation that God is not only magnificent and mysterious - but occasionally mischievous as well. The cast. Naaman. His name means charm or pleasantness.

Apparently a relatively nice fellow as standards of his day would define nice. A powerful personage too - the text calls him "commander of the army of the king of Aram" (modern-day Syria). He was well regarded at court: "a great man and in high favor with his master," and the reason was "by him the Lord had given victory to Aram." Victory over whom? Israel (so the tensions between those two that exist today are nothing new).

Naaman was on top of the world...but... He was the poster boy for that old saying, "You can have it all, but if you don't have your health, you have nothing." Our "mighty warrior" was a leper. Now his kind of Leprosy was not the disfiguring, nerve-destroying leprosy we have read about in most Bible stories. Naaman is not barred from any contacts or activities because of his condition. He has face-to-face access to his king. The word here translated as "leprosy" is actually a generic term that describes a large number of skin disorders. Although not as contagious - it was apparently just as life-threatening. The ironic part of this story is how the powerful can be so powerless.

Another irony of this story is the major role is about to be played by a minor character, Naaman's wife's Israelite slave girl. Someone so inconsequential in the grand scheme of things that she is not even named. The captive helping the captor? She has advice? Actually, yes. She tells her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So to try and make this the *abbreviated* version - The Slave-girl tells the mistress of this Prophet in Israel (yes - the country that they just invaded and made the prisoners into their slaves) and that this prophet could heal Naaman of his leprosy. So this *slave-girl* convinces her mistress who convinces Naaman who then convinces the king of Aram who writes a letter to the king of Israel and sends a large amount of money and gifts - asking him to heal his servant Naaman from his leprosy.

Now this entire entourage shows up at the door of the King of Israel with the request to heal Naaman. We read that the king "Tore his clothes." Now if you understand Hebrew tradition, when you are in mourning - you tear your clothes. It's equivalent to wearing a black arm-band. And the king says, "Am I GOD that they expect ME to cleanse this man from leprosy?!" He's setting me up to make me fail so he can pick a fight with me.

Stay with me here - we're finally getting to the main player. The prophet Elisha hears of the king's distress and simply says, "Send him to me and I will heal him." So Naaman takes his entire entourage to Elisha's house where Elisha doesn't even come out to *greet* this important visitor. He just sends out a message to go and wash in the Jordan River 7 times - and be healed. What? Elisha can't come *in person* and tell him? No elaborate prayers to God - No special dance or waving of hands? Just go and dip in the water 7 times. And in the Muddy Jordan? The Abana and Pharhar rivers of Damascus are much cleaner than these waters of Israel. Forget it! Let's go home! It can't be as simple as it seems! Once again - it's a lowly servant who speaks wisdom. Master - if he asked you to do something *difficult* you would have done it. All he says is "wash and be clean" - and you're not going to DO it? So he swallows his pride - puts aside his arrogance - takes the advice of a foreign Prophet and an Israelite Slave - and he's Healed!

Naaman had a deadly skin disorder. The Prophet of God said "Wash yourself 7 times and be healed." Naaman doubts, denies, argues, is insulted, ridicules, and resists - because it CAN'T be as simple as it seems. Finally agrees to follow the instructions from God. And guess what? He's healed. He gets what he asks for.

I took the time to break down this story - because WE are infected with a deadly disease. It's called sinfulness. What's the matter? You're not squirming in your seats. You don't seem concerned. I think we have heard all the religious references to the struggles of sin, the battle with sin, turning from sin, that we start to *ignore* sin. It's easy to ignore sin - in *THIS* life. But what about in the NEXT life *AFTER* our Earthly life? If we don't deal with sin *HERE* - it will definitely kill us *There!* There is a cure for Sin. It's a simple cure. It's very similar to the cure Elisha gave to Naaman. WASH! Not *seven* times - but *three* times. We wash in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And in this water of Baptism our sin is washed away. That's the first part of the cleansing ritual.

Some people start this cleansing later in life, many begin it as an infant. But as we grow, we become more like Naaman than we would like to admit. Our arrogance grows and we don't need to follow God's instructions. Sure we made promises to "Attend the services of God's House; Learn the Creed, the 10 Commandments and the Lord's Prayer." We get a little overconfident. Be baptized? Go to church? Learn a few things? And from doing that we get rid of our sin and have eternal Life? It can't be that Simple. There's got to be a catch. Forget it. After all - I've been Baptized - what's the worry? Well the worry comes in listening to the ENTIRE plan of healing. The 16th chapter of Mark tells us, "The one who *believes* and is baptized will be saved;" Having your child baptized is only the *first step* in the healing process. Teaching them what to believe - is the rest. But when I Baptize a child, I don't worry about that because the parents and sponsors stand here and Promise. They don't promise me. They promise God that they will "Bring them to the services of God's House; Teach them the Creed, the 10 Commandments and the Lord's Prayer." And we, the people of God, we welcome them into the Lord's family and we commit to *help* them in this teaching.

Now I have noticed in those rare occasions that parents and sponsors are not too diligent in keeping these promises they make to God. They often come to me asking to baptize their 2nd and sometimes their 3rd child. Why do I agree to do this when they haven't kept the promises they made to the previous children? Because they didn't make these promises to me or make them to you, they made them to God. And I have learned that God always gets what God wants.

It is a lot easier on us if we begin this teaching in infancy. Have you ever wondered how they train an elephant? The first step is making it believe it can't run away. Get your elephant, preferably a baby one, and tie it to a strong steel stake in the ground, like you would tie a horse to a hitching post. The baby elephant will try to break free, but it won't have the strength to do so. Eventually, the little elephant will give up and stop trying to escape from the rope and the stake that limit its range. Once the young elephant has learned that it cannot pull the stake from the ground, you can replace the strong stake with a smaller wooden one, even though it wouldn't have enough strength to hold the elephant. An elephant trained in its babyhood to believe that the stake is strong and won't budge won't attempt to break loose and run away even after it has grown strong enough to easily yank almost any stake out of the ground.

Isn't it better to teach faith *early* in life so it can be used *throughout* life. We are best trained in our youth by a strong stake in the ground that teaches us where the limits are, by being taught about the difference between right and wrong. By learning the Creed, the 10 Command-ments and the Lord's Prayer. That stake is the teachings of Jesus Christ. If we discipline yourself now, we'll be able to control ourselves when really difficult times of temptation come our way. "The one who *believes* and is baptized will be saved."

A lot of parents take that first step, but that's no different that going to the doctor to get the diagnosis and never filling the prescription. Sin can be a deadly disease. It's cure is Simple. Baptize - wash away the sin. And Believe - continue to be forgiven for your sins. For something as important as Eternal Life, this seems too simple. The good news is - it's as simple as it seems.
Amen.