

Proper 23, Year C (RCL)
October 9, 2022
New Song Church
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2 Kings 5:1-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

Speaking Truth to Power

Gracious God,
Like fists unclenching, open us.
Like buds swelling, open us.
Like a birthing, open us.
Open us to the power and presence of your Spirit in this word.
Amen

The Hebrew scriptures are the stories of the God of Israel
and how God has acted in the course of human history.
They tell the story of how the people of Israel came to be –
what set them apart and formed them as a people –
what sustained them in times of adversity –
what they believe, and how they are instructed to live.
They are sacred stories that say to the Hebrew people,
“This is who you are,” and equally significantly,
“This is who you are NOT.”
“You are not like the other nations who worship other gods –
you are special – you are my chosen people

Given that context, this story of the healing of Naaman in Second Kings is surprising.
It is a surprising story on several counts,
but the most obvious is that Naaman is not an Israelite,
nor does he worship the God of Israel.
Rather, he is from Aram, Israel’s enemy – the powerhouse to the northeast –
more commonly known to us as Syria.
In fact, Naaman is a commander in the Aramean army and has, quite recently,
led Aram to a military victory over Israel –
a victory, according to our text, that *the Lord* had granted to Aram –

another surprise.

A God who gives victory to the enemy?

Interesting that this defeat is chronicled as part of Israel's history.

Don't the writers of history get to decide how they want their story to read?

Did the writer of Second Kings see this defeat as part

of some greater plan God had in mind for Israel? For Aram?

In Aram, Naaman is a wealthy, important, powerful man

who is in favor with the king;

in fact he is one of the king's most trusted inner circle.

Except for the king, Naaman answers to no one.

He is the kind of man who is more likely to give orders than to ask questions.

He is confident, self-assured, even arrogant.

Yet for all his power and greatness,

Naaman's otherwise enviable life is shadowed with a terrible affliction.

He suffers from leprosy –

a condition that he cannot hide since it affects his hands and his feet.

In Israel, his leprosy would render him ritually unclean and a social outcast.

Naaman is fortunate that Aram does not operate by Israel's purity laws.

Still, it is an awful disease.

Naaman has doubtless tried every treatment, salve, and potion imaginable.

He has spared no cost but has no cure to show for it.

Behind the confident commander of armies hides a frightened man,

desperate for healing from this affliction that causes children to stare

and his wife to avert her eyes.

Perhaps it is this desperation that leads to Naaman's uncharacteristic

openness to the advice of his wife's servant –

a nobody on the very lowest rung of the social ladder in his household

– a child, and a girl at that, brought back as a part of the spoils

from his most recent military victory over Israel,

a victory in which she was most likely left orphaned
by the hand of Naaman's forces.

She is as weak as he is powerful.

Barbara Lundblat reflects on this young servant saying,
"Yet, she is not silent.

'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria!

He would cure him of his leprosy,' she tells her mistress."ⁱ

Another surprise – why would this enslaved girl,

a victim of Naaman's violence, have any desire to help him?

We might expect her to be hard, bitter, or angry.

Why does she open her heart to this man who has broken hers?

And why would he listen to one so insignificant?

Whatever the reason, Naaman is open to her suggestion.

He goes immediately to the king to ask permission to travel
to Israel in search of the prophet.

Before long, he sets off with a letter of introduction in his hand,
written to the king of Israel from the king of Aram.

He also takes ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold,

and ten sets of garments to offer as payment for his healing,
horses and chariots to carry it all,

and several servants to accompany him on his journey.

The next scene of the story is rather amusing.

It seems that the king of Aram has failed, in his letter,

to mention that the prophet, rather than the king,
is the expected agent of the healing.

The king of Israel panics – sure that this must be a trick –

and tears his clothes in despair.

"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 his is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”

Now Elisha, the prophet, has somehow heard of Naaman’s request
and the king’s distress.

He sends word to the king by way of a messenger.

“Why have you torn your clothes?

Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

Is the king not aware that there was a prophet in Israel?

Surely he has heard the news of Elisha bringing the Shunemite
woman’s son back from the dead.

Why didn’t he think of Elisha the worker of miracles?

The offer made however,

the king readily defers to the prophet

(yet another surprise -- since when do kings listen to prophets –
especially condescending ones –

even if they can bring a child back from the dead?).

But the king is open to anything that has a chance

of maintaining Israel’s uneasy peace with Aram.

He cannot afford another war.

He sends Naaman and his entourage off with the messenger to Elisha.

When they arrive, Elisha sends another messenger out to greet them.

The messenger tells Naaman that he is to go

and wash seven times in the Jordan River

and his flesh will be restored.

At this, Naaman flies into a rage.

This is not at all what he had in mind when he made this journey.

He is an important man and this Elisha

should at least have the decency to come out and talk to him face-to-face.

The audacity, sending him a mere messenger!

Now, if Naaman were to stop and think for a moment,
he'd realize that, so far, he's been quite dependent
on the kindness of servants and messengers in this venture,
but that thought doesn't occur to him and he explodes in a fury.
He turns on his heel and leaves,
objecting loudly to this final indignity
and muttering something about the rivers of his homeland
being far superior to the filthy River Jordan.
He'd been willing to give this crazy scheme a try,
but enough is enough; his ego can take no more.

"And that would have been the end of it," Barbara Lundblat explains –
"Except for the servants.

Horrorified with their master's behavior,
they dare to speak their minds to this man
who holds not only their lives, but also the lives
of their wives and children in his hand.
'Father,' they challenge him, their voices shaking,
'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?'
Clever servants. Of course, he'd do something difficult.
He has done many difficult things before.
He is, after all, a mighty warrior.
They appeal to his inflated ego, and their plan works.
Without another word of complaint, Naaman turns around –
should we say, 'repents?' –
goes down to the Jordan, and immerses himself seven times.
When he comes out of the water that last time,
he looks down at his hands and feet.
His flesh is like the flesh of a young boy."ⁱⁱ

Credit the servants for suppressing
the “I told you so’s” they must have been thinking.

Instead, they simply shoot knowing glances at one another
as they follow Naaman back to the prophet.

Elisha comes out to greet him face-to-face this time.

“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel!” Naaman exclaims.

His heart is opened and his skin is healed –
he is a new man inside and out.

Naaman had not believed in the God of Israel before his healing,
but there is no doubt in his mind now.

He has his life back again thanks to this man of God – oh, yes,
and to several servants and messengers.

It seems that the healing that took place in that muddy Jordan River
was not simply to his skin affliction, but also to his pride.

Naaman is well on his way to being truly whole.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, this is a surprising story.

The characters – the enslaved girl, the prophet, the servants, --
don’t behave as we might expect.

They seem to be guided by surprising openness to others
and to the power of God working through them.

First, a child came, bringing the gift of her openness to the man
who had captured her and brought her home to be a slave in his house . . .

If we can be open to those outside our circle –
those who look, or act, or worship differently than we do –
those we perceive to be a threat –
even those we know to be a threat to us –
what wonders might such openness bring about in our lives?

Next, there was a prophet in Israel,

a man of God who believed that, as the bumper sticker says,

“God loves the whole world, no exceptions,”

who opened himself to be the agent of God’s healing to this foreigner

who had so recently ravaged his beloved country and left it wounded.

Again, how might our lives and the life of our world be transformed

if we were all to care for the very real needs of our enemies?

Might our enemies become our friends?

And Naaman’s servants were by his side, offering their gifts

of their presence and of the courage to speak truth to power . . .

Can we offer the gift of our presence to others,

even those in positions of power over us?

Do we have the courage of the servants to speak the truth,

regardless of the consequences?

What openness might such gifts of presence and courage

bring about in our lives and our world?

And finally, there is Naaman, who opened himself in humility

to hear the words of the servant girl, of Elisha’s God, and of his servants. . . .

Can we humble ourselves?

Give up our need to be in control?

Can we swallow our pride and ask for help when we need it?

Most of us, like Naaman, are searching for healing in our lives,

though our various afflictions may not be so obvious for all to see.

Our hunger for healing may be one of the things that led us here this morning.

We long to be whole.

We want to be open to the power of God at work in our lives,

and in the lives of those we love.

We come in search of restored relationships, renewed passion,
a salve to soothe the hurts of life, and a reason to hope.
We come seeking the new life promised in these baptismal waters,
to eat the Bread of Life and to drink the Cup of Salvation.
We come as we are,
however broken,
open to the power of God to transform our lives and make us new.

Gracious God,
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Like buds swelling, open us.
Like a birthing, open us.
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Amen

ⁱ Barbara Lundblatt, Day One. Feb. 16, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.