

Sermon for 6 Epiphany/Proper 1, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Naaman is the successful commander of the army of Syria. He is rich. He is powerful. He is a superstar. He is the one we all want to be. He has parlayed the talents and gifts God has given him into worldly success. He has been blessed. The author of Kings says that “by him *the Lord* had given victory to Syria.” On the other hand, he is the enemy of Israel. He is also a leper. After all that blessing, God has allowed him to become ill with a disease that will end everything he has gained.

We are all like Naaman. We may not all be superstars. But God has given everyone here talents and abilities. And he has given each of us a purpose for which we are to use those talents and abilities. God has a plan for you. But each of us is also diseased. None of us has been perfected yet. And only if we cooperate with him will we be healed.

The question for Naaman is: Will he cooperate? He is used to running the show, just like we are. He is used to getting his own way, just like we are. He is also used to having slaves who keep their stations, but there is one small Hebrew child who doesn't know any better, who suggests that the prophet Elisha might be able to help. And here is Naaman, reduced to taking the advice of a slave girl, because there don't seem to be any other options.

Out of desperation, Naaman is willing to listen to the Hebrew slave girl. But there is another problem. In order to get to Elisha, he has to go into Israel, which is enemy territory. It's not the danger that is the problem really. After all, Syria is much stronger than little Israel. The fear factor ought to keep him safe. But it's humbling to have to ask for help from a rival. So Naaman goes to his buddy, the king of Syria, who sets him up with an intimidating letter of introduction, which may or may not be taken as a veiled threat. And then he takes a huge amount of money to pay for the service of healing that the Israelite will render him. He makes a grand procession into Israel, as befits a person of so great a stature.

Naaman has humbled himself a little. But he's only doing it in such a way as to maintain his rightful station in life. He's only doing it in such a way as to maintain control. This is the way we so often approach God, isn't it? We want what God can give us, but we don't want to give anything up. We want to take the blessing and run. But the God who blessed Naaman and allowed him to get sick and sent the little slave girl to tell him about the prophet; the God who has a plan for him still isn't done with him yet.

It turns out that they were right about the fear factor. The king of Israel reads the letter and thinks that *he* has to heal Naaman of his leprosy, which

everyone knows is impossible. So he gets all jittery and accuses the king of Syria of trying to make up excuses to attack him. What no one seems to have anticipated (except the little slave girl, to whom no one really listened) is that God himself might act, through his prophet.

The original idea was very simple. “Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him.” But that simple idea is a dangerous idea. We want the cure, but we don’t want it to be so simple, because in simplicity we might find out who we really are rather than keeping up appearances. In the simple idea is the truth that God is God and we are not. And that is the hardest truth to swallow for people who are used to being in charge of their own lives, like us. And so Naaman tries to control the situation, the king of Syria tries to control the situation, and the king of Israel flies off the handle because he knows he can’t control the situation. All of them complicating things, when all that had to happen is to get Naaman to Elisha.

When the prophet hears of all this roundaboutation, he cuts straight through all of the complications and goes straight back to the simple idea. “Let him come now to me.” And now Naaman has to give up a measure of that control that he was trying to hold on to. To his credit, he does it. He takes his whole military wagon train and all his money up to Elisha’s little house. And it is there that he is hit with the final indignity. The prophet doesn’t even come out of the house. He sends someone out with a silly message to go take seven baths in the muddy little creek that these Hebrews call the Jordan River.

Now Naaman has had it. He is not going to be trifled with any longer. He is going home. He hasn’t even met with polite hospitality. The prophet didn’t even come out and pray publicly. No one has done anything that would befit someone of Naaman’s rank and station. There are muddy creeks (and better!) at home, which is where he is now going. How often we reject the gift that is staring us in the eye, simply because it didn’t come in the way we wanted it. We didn’t want to accept the fact that we are poor beggars on God’s doorstep, rather than the captains of our own destinies. And so we take our toys and go home. Without being healed of the deadly disease.

But here Naaman’s history of good character comes to his rescue. He is obviously a good master, because he has good servants, who are allowed to question him and give advice. They say, “Why not give it a try, now that we’ve come all this way?” And he takes the advice and washes himself miraculously clean. Obviously, it isn’t the washing in the Jordan that makes him well again. The Jordan is still just a muddy creek. But he has finally humbled himself under the simple truth that he is not in control. He has obeyed the word of God through the prophet, even though that word did not come in the form or with the content he expected or wanted.

The good thing about Naaman is that he learns from his mistakes. From this brief encounter with the living God, he learns what the nation of Israel hasn't learned in some 600 years of miraculous intervention. He says, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel." And he says it publicly, in front of God and everyone, so he can be called on it later, even if he tries to change his mind.

Naaman had to obey before he was healed. But we are very often like the leper in our Gospel today, cured before obedience as a token of God's goodness. Naaman had to humble himself to go and wash. Most of us were washed in baptism by God himself, through our parents, before we could even object to being humbled. And like the leper cured by Jesus, the question of obedience comes after the cure.

Jesus told the man not to say anything to anyone about how he was cured, because Jesus' mission was to preach the good news, not to wow people with his acts of power. The man disobeyed, and his healing was immediately arrested. We don't have the rest of his story, but you can be sure that there was more work that God needed to do in him. But disobedience is sin and death. We cannot ultimately be healed if we insist on our disobedience.

If we intend to follow Jesus, then we must give up our self-importance. We must come to God on our knees, knowing that anything he gives us is out of sheer goodness on his part. We must accept it in the way he gives it, rather than complaining about the packaging. And finally, we must do whatever he tells us. If we do all that, we will be healed.