

2 Kings 5:1-14 Sermon

An interesting story today. Nothing big or monumental in the telling of our history as people of faith. More of a slice of life in an ancient community in the ancient Near East. It's not one of the stories told often in our churches but it's a great story. A story that can teach us much about the people back then and, with our 3000+ years of experience and hindsight, a story from which we can learn even more now. Shall we get into it?

[Pray with me.]

In the years following King Solomon the nation of Israel divided in two. The bible says it was because the kings were not devout followers of the Hebrew God like King David had been, so they had to be divided. Denying lineage of the unfaithful kings the throne was God's way of punishing them. Now... I have to pause a minute whenever I hear about how faithful King David was because in a good bit of what I read about him... he's a little bit of a stinker. King David did some messed up stuff. But then I realized something I had been missing. Yes, David was a stinker. He messed up often. But he always went back and repented. He realized his mistake, admitted it, and went to God begging forgiveness. And God always forgave him.

So, if I might pause here for a moment to say that if you get nothing else from what I have to say to you today I want you to get this. God doesn't expect us to be perfect. God made us. God knows we aren't perfect. Knows it more than anyone. God expects us to mess up every now and again. Oh, don't get me wrong, we don't have to mess up. We have the powers within us to resist whatever it is that leads us to sin, but God knows we are going to sin on occasion. Otherwise there would be no need for a plan of salvation. We wouldn't need the death and resurrection of Jesus. So clearly, we mess up. And God loves us anyway. So, we've been granted this system... this process for receiving grace. See, if you confess your sins and ask God to forgive you, you are forgiven. Oh, you may still have to deal with the consequences of your sinful actions – although often not as severely as you would if you had NOT repented. That's more of God's grace.

So, never think you are not good enough. David was a rascal and he was God's heart. He set the standard that all future kings of Israel and Judah had to live up to. And most failed. Not because they did worse things than David. Not because they committed bigger sins. But because they didn't find it necessary to confess their sins and beg forgiveness. It's because they forgot their God. But those who remember are forgiven and blessed. Remember that.

So, the people of Israel had been split into two nations – the Kingdom of Israel and to its south the Kingdom of Judah. There were other kingdoms around them as well and there were frequent border skirmishes that sometimes grew to full blown war. The relationship between kingdoms was tenuous at best. They never really trusted each other unless they had to. That was kinda the relationship between the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Aram to their northeast.

In Aram, there was a beloved military commander named Naaman. He and his command had brought to the kingdom many great victories. He was an important man. Except for one thing... he had leprosy – the dreaded skin disease that engendered so much fear in the people back then. Someone with leprosy was deemed unclean. At the later stages in the development of their disease people with leprosy were required to cover their mouths and walk around yelling out, “Unclean! Unclean!” Eventually they were cast out of the city and forced to live in colonies with others with the disease. That’s a horrible existence for anyone. Imagine the fear and despair Naaman must’ve felt knowing that is where he was headed. One minute he’s a great warrior with numerous victories under his belt and the ear of the king and the next minute he’s an outcast. I imagine things had to be pretty tense around his household. Not just for Naaman but everyone. Their lives were also about to change dramatically. See, disease not only affects those who have it. It also affects those around them. It also hits the family. It also hits the friends. It also hits those who depend on the infected. I don’t know what kind of pension plan there was for the Kingdom of Aram military but there were probably a whole lot of folks who were about to have very different lives because of Naaman’s leprosy. They were potentially about to become outcasts too. So, yeah... I’m betting it was pretty tense around that household.

I mentioned earlier that there were periodic border raids between the neighboring countries and the result of one of those raids was a young Israelite girl serving as the maid to the wife of Naaman. This slave girl felt the tension in the house and for whatever reason injected herself into the situation and offered a solution. I talk about this slave girl with some bewilderment. Because I’m not going to lie to you... if I was a slave and my slaver caught a disease that was going to knock him all the way down to maybe even below me... I might sit back and watch it happen. I mean what more could happen to me? I’m already a slave. I might have sat back and watched Naaman’s world crumble. And real talk, I might have giggled a little bit while it happened. Not proud of it. Just being real.

But not this sweet slave girl. We don’t know how she knew about Elisha. Maybe she’d only heard stories. Maybe she was originally from Samaria. What we know is

she believed that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal her master and all his household of his disease. And she willingly shared that information with her mistress. The mistress told her husband and Naaman told his king.

Now it wasn't their faith or their god but Naaman was so important to the king that he was willing to send him into a foreign land seeking relief. He was willing to send the head of one of his armies into the hands of his sometimes enemy. He had to humble himself to find release from this disease of Naaman's that was affecting them all. He sent a letter to the King of Israel advising the purpose of Naaman's visit along with a whole lot of loot to show his good faith. Probably a painful but necessary move. Otherwise imagine what you would think if your neighbor's greatest warrior starts marching across your land. And you know he wasn't traveling alone. I mean he probably didn't have an entire army but I'm sure he had some muscle with him. Somebody had to protect all that loot.

Isn't it interesting how sometimes the very thing we do thinking it will help often generates fear instead? The thing we thought would ease anxiety instead increases it? That's what happened with the letter the King of Aram sent to the King of Israel. The King of Israel read it and panicked! "What makes him think I can heal his man. Who does he think I am? He must be trying to set me up. He's trying to start a war and make it look like it's my fault."

I don't know. I don't know the relationship between the two kings. Maybe the King of Israel was right not to trust his neighboring king. Maybe he was right to go into such a fit when he got the letter. But what I find interesting, is that this would be King of Israel's first reaction. I mean if he really knew his kingdom and if he was really keeping faithful to his God then his first thought should've been to believe that his God could do it. If he really had faith in his God like the King of Israel is supposed to have, then he should've seen this as an opportunity to show those sinful Arameans the power of his God. Instead of throwing a fit, he probably should've just said a prayer asking God for the healing of Naaman's leprosy. I mean that's what a man of faith should've been thinking.

But that's not our faithless king. The King of Israel makes a big stink and word gets to Elisha the prophet. Elisha did what the king should've done. Elisha pulls up and is like, "Okay what's going on here?" The king tells him the story and Elisha was like, "Is that all? My God can handle that. Send the dude to me I'll take care of it." That's probably how the king should've reacted. Before throwing a fit, he should have at least checked with his prophet.

But then I wonder how different I would have been. How many times have we come up against something, and our first thought was to panic. We think it's impossible and there is no good way to get out of the situation. Like the King of Israel, we forget that there is a prophet in the land.

Naaman goes to Elisha in all his glory. The great warrior and his entourage pulling up in front of the humble abode of a prophet. He's got horses and chariots and men at arms surrounding him. He looks big and fierce and important. But Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him. He sends out a servant with a message for Naaman. Tells him what to do to get his leprosy healed. He's to go dip in the water of the Jordan river 7 times. And after the 7th dip he would be healed.

So, Naaman got the answer he sought. He went to Israel because they supposedly had healers who could help him with his disease. He went to a healer and was told what he needed to do to receive his healing. So, he got what he came for. But instead of going away to do what he was instructed, he went away angry. Problem was the cure he sought didn't come in the right package. He hadn't received the proper and due respect. He expected a big affair. He wanted lights and magic and pyrotechnics. He wanted a show not just a message. And why in the heck would he go dip in that polluted trickle of mud they call the River Jordan? There are much cleaner rivers back home. He could dip in one of them. At least he'd get clean from dipping there. Because there was no way dipping in a river was going to cure his leprosy.

We condemn this brother for his pride and unbelief, and he clearly had it. But I think to condemn him might be the case where pointing the finger at somebody means four fingers pointing back at you. Because I don't know about you, but I can think of several times I've almost missed a blessing because of pride. Too proud to accept the counsel of someone I thought less educated or experienced than me. Too proud to ask for help when I'm over my head. Too proud to accept it when offered. I forget that there is a prophet in Israel. And every time I do, I almost miss out on my healing. If you call on God... and you very much should call on God in times of dis ease... if you call on God for an answer, expect that answer in unexpected ways.

Once again in this story with Kings and mighty warriors and great prophets, it is the servant class that steps in to change the trajectory of the story. It was Naaman's servants who stopped him and advised him of his folly. Figuratively slapped him in the face with reality. "You came here because you believed you could find healing from this Israelite prophet. You left the relative safety of your home and marched into what could be enemy territory because you believed that you could find healing from this Israelite prophet. We're here. Okay so you don't like what he told you to

do or how you have to do it. So what? What's it hurt to give it a try? What do you have to lose? You already got leprosy."

I like this story because it is so human... it's so familiar. And I don't know about you, but I can place myself in each one of the characters in this story. I can understand what they felt. I can anticipate what they thought. And what I see as a thread in each of them is an eternal hope that things can be different. When things seem at their worst, we have hope that they can be better. Why? Because we have the promises of God. We are covered under the covenant. God loves us unconditionally and will also be working to make things right for us. We just have to believe it.

Let me finish this.

There are two behaviors in this story that I think we should avoid. First is obviously Naaman. See, it wasn't that he didn't believe he could get healed. He just didn't like the way it was to come about. Forced him to do something that he thought was beneath him. We can't let our pride or even our expectations get in the way of our blessings. We must be open to God moving in unexpected ways. Remember, the goal is to be healed.

The other and most offensive behavior in this story I think, is the King of Israel. He of all people should've been excited by the prospect of showing this unbeliever the power of the God of Israel. But no. He was too busy focusing on his earthly kingdom that he almost missed out on a miracle. I caution us not to miss out. We must never forget the power of our God to work miracles in our world.

Leprosy isn't such a big deal anymore. It's been pretty much eradicated from the earth. But suppose we look at this disease as a metaphor. Leprosy could be opioid addiction. Leprosy could be mental illness. Anything that causes dis ease in our community. Leprosy could be intolerance. Leprosy could be hatred. Almost anything. Our Psalm this morning reminds us that there is always hope. We who are people of faith should know that if we call on the Lord our healing is imminent. And so, we should never lose hope. If you'll allow me to Christian up this Old Testament story up for a minute, I say to you that there is a prophet in Israel. And his name is Jesus. So, any problems we have... any healing we need... any dis eases that must be remedied, we can take it to him. And if we are obedient, our healing will come.

There is a leprosy on our planet today. There is dis ease all around us today. And there are those who are stoking it. Poking at it. Trying to make it worse. But there is

a prophet in Israel. And if we continue to believe and be faithful, our land will be healed.

Amen