**2 Kings 5:1-14** February 4, 2018

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 5

*2 Kings 5:1Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.*

*2Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. 3She said to her mistress, “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” 4Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. 5“By all means, go,” the king of Aram replied. “I will send a letter to the king of Israel.” So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. 6The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: “With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.” 7As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!”*

*8When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: “Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.” 9So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” 11But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. 12Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?” So he turned and went off in a rage.*

*13Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!” 14So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Where Are You Going, Naaman?**

**I. You Go to Woo and Influence**

He grabs the car keys, puts on his coat, and opens the door. She asks, “Hey, Honey, where are you going?” No demand, no suspicion. She’s just wondering, just wants to know. “Where are you going?” is the most natural question when someone is headed out the door.

“Naaman, where are you going?” Maybe Naaman’s wife asked him that question when he left the house that day. He had had things on his mind for quite a while. He was a man of success, great success. More success, than any of us. He was of the sort that lives in the exclusive neighborhood with big lots and huge houses. (You always wonder how they keep those things clean, don’t you?) You can drive by those houses and admire—or maybe you feel just a little bit, well, not exactly jealous, but just kind of wish you could experience that for a few weeks. But the fact of the matter is that they have had success, and we do well to remember God’s word about the heathen man, Naaman: ***“He was a great man… because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram.”*** Remember that the Lord gives success.

Yet it doesn’t matter whether you are a four star general, or live in a 6,000 square foot mansion, or a cardboard box, there is always this: ***“but he had leprosy.”*** No one is so perfect that they don’t have something hurting them. Naaman was successful… and he had an incurable terminal disease. All the success, all the victory, all the honor of a general with thousands of strong men in arms obedient to his bidding, but ever with this chink in his armor: leprosy; a constant reminder of his mortality.

However successful we might be in life, we share a human flesh which will successfully fight decay for seven or eight or nine decades. That’s it. And whatever modern medicine might promise in treatments and cures or even genetic engineering, while we can talk of a person’s success yet the truth of the story is always, ***“but he had leprosy.”*** But she had cancer. But they found him one day in his rocking chair.

So Naaman desperately fought it. He even resorts to following the advice of a captured Israelite servant girl in his house. He seeks out this much-vaunted prophet who can supposedly achieve the impossible, cure leprosy. Naaman calls in a favor with his king (that’s how successful he is!). The king of Aram ponders the request and realizes that without a general like Naaman his kingdom might be just another two-bit kingdom. So the king sends out Naaman with his blessing and a caravan of gifts.

“Where are you going, Naaman?”

“To get rid of the problem. To buy off God. To ante up so that the man of God can’t help but be dazzled by the glint of gold and luxuriousness of the clothes I offer him. I go to get shut of this leprosy so I can move on in life.”

Usually, we wish away the anxieties of life. But when we can’t wish them away, like Naaman, we get to work. We get information, we discipline ourselves, we see a specialist. And when working fails (though sometimes God allows it to work), then we start to bargain with God. We promise to give up bad habits. We offer ourselves to God, like young Martin Luther one time bound himself to becoming a monk in return for saving his life in a dangerous situation. We go, like Naaman, to find God, to woo him, to win his favor with what we can offer him.

Recently a news personality, a religious man though not a Christian, was talking about his personal troubles and God. He said, “I don’t want God’s love, I want his admiration.” Yes, he, like Naaman, can only think of God in human terms, as one to be wooed and influenced, to be wined and dined, to be courted and bought off. One who will do what we want if we can just offer him the proper incentives to act.

But you Christians know what Naaman did not yet understand. We know what the Bible tells us, *“It is by grace you have been saved, and not by works.”* You understand what some of our best-loved hymns sing, “Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling,” “Just as I am, without one plea,” “Amazing grace… that saved a wretch like me.”

Through our long exposure to God’s tremendous grace in Jesus Christ, and a realization of our sinfulness, we realize the fool’s errand that Naaman was on. He was going to buy God off. That would not work.

**II. You Go Because You Don’t Get Your Way**

So Naaman eventually shows up at Elisha’s door. Imagine peeking out from behind the curtains seeing a line of black limousines, security officers, an armored car apparently full of money, for you!

That was Naaman, his caravan of gifts, and a body guard of soldiers in front of Elisha’s house. The way it was supposed to work was this. When General Naaman came to Prophet Elisha, Elisha was supposed to go out there. They would commiserate on the challenges of being great men, and then Naaman would negotiate a way to get Elisha to help him. Elisha would see the king’s letter of reference in Naaman’s hand. Naaman would show his respect to Elisha by offering gifts worth millions of dollars. It was one of those, “I scratch your back, and you scratch mine” arrangements.

But Elisha would have none of it. Sure, Elisha offered the cure, but only through the mouth of a humble messenger. The prophet would not go out to meet Naaman. Though the Word does not explain, it seems certain that Elisha refused to give the impression that the God of Israel is bought by pagans bearing gifts.

So the Christian church of all time must make sure to never give the impression that God is a respecter of persons. God gives no spiritual privilege to the wealthy and influential of this world, nor to what any of us can offer.

God’s message to Naaman, through Elisha’s refusal to go out to meet Naaman, is that none—none at all—can come to God claiming any privilege. All are tiny creatures, whether death row inmate or emperor. All must bow before God, his will, admit their unworthiness, and listen to God. Naaman is a practical example of what Jesus meant when he said, *“I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”* (Mt 19:24).

But it wasn’t just that Elisha wouldn’t show his face. More than that, Elisha’s cure was offensive to Naaman. ***“Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan,”*** and you will be healed. It seemed the most foolish of things. No medicine. No magical incantations. No prophet even showing his face. And a bath in a muddy river!

So ***“Naaman went away angry and said, ‘I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not… the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?’ So he turned and went off in a rage.”***

Where are you going, Naaman? You would travel land and sea to find a cure—on your terms! When God says something you do not like, you storm off because God has not conformed to your way of thinking? Do you play the tune and expect God to dance to it?

Does that ever happen? Many a visitor has stormed out of our church due to our practice of close communion. Should we therefore apologize, change what God has declared in his word, just because people only want a God who dances to their tune? Should we change—oh, how many different things—teachings about creation, or sexual relations, respect of authority just because many people in our world think God’s teachings are out of touch with modern thinking? Should we not speak of money, because when you start to talk about money in church (even though God’s word frequently brings up the subject) people get upset?

What are those things that when God’s word speaks, we walk out?

Naaman, where are you going? Don’t you realize that you are walking out on God? Don’t you see your silly little human pride? Don’t you know that you choose death? Sure, Naaman, go ahead, don’t bathe in the Jordan River. Sure, Naaman, go home just because God’s prophet didn’t bow and grovel before you. Naaman, think about where you are going!

**III. You Go with Trust**

Which is pretty much what Naaman’s servants told him. I don’t know if they had true full saving faith in the God of Israel yet. But faith’s flame had been kindled. They were inclined to trust this prophet and his God, and to see if what he said might not actually bear fruit. They asked Naaman where he was going. ***“My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!”***

Yes, if God tells us to do what we want, how eager we are. If one of the commandments was “Eat more chocolate!” We would be all over that! If he said, “Be nice to people except when they are mean…” O, wouldn’t that bring us a lot of satisfaction instead of biting our tongue! Naaman would have climbed mountains and conquered armies. But a simple bathing, just because God said so? Naaman was out of there!

Thanks be to God for Naaman’s wise servants. God used them to tame Naaman’s pride, to direct him to God’s will. Through their testimony, the first spark of faith, of trust, was lit in Naaman’s heart.

***“So [Naaman] went.”*** O, great Naaman, now where are you going? He goes in faith—a bruised reed sort of faith, a smoldering wick sort of faith, but faith. He trusts and hopes however feebly in the God of Israel. And when he had humbled himself, when he had abandoned his pride, then ***“he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.”*** God’s response to faith! Just think: without leprosy he would never have have faith.

**Epilogue:**

We must read a few words from just after our reading, ***“Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God.”*** Where are you going, Naaman? He goes to the man of God, this time with no demands. This time Elisha comes out to meet him. ***“[Naaman] stood before [Elisha] and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.’”***

Oh, dear Christians, where are you going? Naaman had his encounter with God. Today, in God’s word, in our liturgy, in this sacrament, you encounter God’s great grace. Christ Jesus has dealt with us so mercifully in our lives. Like Naaman, God overcame the natural pride of our hearts through the word of his “prophets” in our lives, whether pastor or father or mother or friend. In this picture of Naaman we are reminded of another even more powerful washing, the washing of Holy Baptism where God made us his people. Like Naaman, God has been pleased to call us to serve him in his kingdom.

Listen to some final words from 2 Kings 5: Naaman said, ***“‘Please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord.’*** He asked for a little earth, a little dirt, from Israel so that he could make an altar and remember the God of Israel back in Aram. He would go, but he would go, remembering. ***‘Go in peace,’ Elisha said.”***

In twenty minutes you will leave this house of prayer and worship. Soon you will put the key in the ignition and drive off into the world. So, Christian, where are you going? Wherever you go, may you go with Elisha’s last words to Naaman, ***“Go in peace.”*** Amen.