

Scriptures: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20; 2 Kings 5:1-16

Independence and Freedom

Good morning friends, and Happy Independence Day, early! As Americans, we prize our independence – we'll see fireworks and parades tomorrow all over the country. Kendra, the girls, and I will be watching them tomorrow night on the shores of Lake Erie. Later this afternoon we'll be starting a four day vacation for us to get away from all the work and responsibilities we have – it's a much-deserved break! In the meantime, we know you'll carry on doing what you do to care for each other and to carry on without us.

We prize our freedom – it's an American trademark. We have a gigantic statue in New York Harbor that has greeted refugees for nearly 140 years. Lady Liberty is a visible symbol of freedom and hope for millions the world over. Church, we've been blessed to live in the United States. As followers of Jesus Christ, we should use that blessing to bless others. The world is filled with our brothers and sisters who even now are seeking liberty – freedom – from oppression in every form.

We're going to spend the next few months, God willing, looking at several Old Testament texts. It's not very common to hear sermons on Old Testament texts in Methodist churches, but bear with me, because the events in the Old Testament point us to Jesus Christ. The prophets have a tendency to speak uncomfortable truths to God's people, and God's people often tend to tune them out, so to speak. This series, "Prophet Margins," focuses on a couple Old Testament prophets who lived on the margins of society in their day. What they had to say wasn't popular. They frequently had run-ins with political leaders, and occasionally even religious leaders. Today we'll dive in, as a refugee girl tells her captor about a prophet in Israel who can give him freedom in an unlikely way. I'll be reading from the New International Version, if you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to 2 Kings 5:1-16. **Read 2 Kings 5:1-16.**

Leaders Are Human

This week there's been a lot of chatter about the aide to President Trump's White House chief-of-staff testifying to Congress about the events of January 6. The stuff she's been telling paints a portrait of Donald Trump that's different than what we're used to seeing or hearing. It could be partly due to us living in a day and time where leaders seem to take themselves too seriously. We have to bear in mind that leaders – of our nation, in the Church, generally, and here at New Hope, and in the schools – they are humans. They suffer. They celebrate. They rejoice! And at times, they mourn.

When they have some illness – some physical ailment – it’s a humbling experience, and tends to make the suffering of others with similar problems resonate in their lives.

Now, it goes without saying that top level government leaders are able to secure the best medical care for themselves. Access to health care isn’t such a big deal to human leadership, especially in government – except when the kind of condition they have is incurable. Then we may see them have a change of heart, or a sense of having a greater purpose than what they originally had when they started out. This brings us to the topic of Naaman, in our passage today.

“Now 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,” (2 Kg. 5:1) we’re told. Aram is an ancient country to the northeast of Israel. It’s capital city was Damascus. You’ve probably heard of that city before – we’ve talked about it with regards to Paul’s conversion earlier this year – but it’s also been in the news pretty frequently. Today Damascus is the capital city of Syria, and they’ve been fighting a civil war over there since 2011. Much like kings of old, their current President inherited the presidency of Syria from his father when he died in 2000, and has held only rigged elections since.

Leprosy & Captivity – Two Kinds of Oppression

When someone wins an election with 95% of the vote, something’s not right! We’re told that Naaman was a good soldier, “but he had leprosy.” We know in those days that was an incurable illness. Once you had it, you were as good as dead. There are guidelines in the Old Testament regarding how people who contracted leprosy had to live.

Leviticus 13 talks all about it. “The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp,” (Lev.13:45-46). Granted, Naaman’s not a Jew – he’s a Gentile from Aram – but we can be fairly certain that the rules the Jews were using regarding keeping illness away from the general population were also being used by Gentiles of the same time period.

The second verse from our text has a key detail in it that sets us up to better understand the rest of the story. “Now bands from Aram had gone out and taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife,” (2 Kg. 5:2). That’s something we may tend to miss in our modern-day mindsets. This girl – from the northern kingdom of Israel – is a captive. She’s been made a slave.

During the pandemic and shut-down I heard quite a few conspiracy theories that the shut-down was being used to round up human traffickers. I can't say I saw much of that on the news or social media, but this girl in Scripture is a classic case of someone being taken out of her country into another against her will. Even instances of profound suffering are useful to God to make Himself known to people! I'm sure the girl missed her family, yet God had a greater purpose in store for her, because He put her into Naaman's house, serving Naaman's wife.

God Does the Healing

We don't know the name of the girl, but apparently she knew God, or at least knew that Elisha was God's prophet. "She said to her mistress, 'If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy,'" (verse 3). Let's cut to the chase here – it isn't a prophet who heals – it's God alone who does the healing. He just sees fit to use certain humans as mediators to get the job done!

Naaman's desperate. He's willing to do just about anything to get rid of the leprosy, right? "Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said," verse 4 records. Can you imagine that?

A leprous general going to the king's palace, and saying something like, "Hey chief, my slave girl told me to go to a prophet in Samaria who can heal me, do you care if I go?" See, there has to be a question with it – because look at what Ben-Hadad, King of Aram says, "By all means go. I will send a letter to the King of Israel," (verse 5a). There's a list of stuff that Naaman takes with him as he sets off to Samaria – "ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing." It doesn't sound like much, until you do the math!

The going rate for silver is \$21.18 per ounce. A talent was 1,200 ounces of silver. Naaman's carrying ten of them, for a value of \$254,160. The going rate for gold is \$58.55 per gram, and a shekel of gold weighs 11.34 grams. Naaman's carrying 6,000 shekels with him, for a value of \$3,983,742. I'm not even going to estimate the value of the ten sets of clothing he was carrying – but I'm certain it's pricey, because he's already carrying \$4,237,902 worth of currency to try to get a cure!

Politicians Involved

He also had the letter from King Ben-Hadad of Aram. "The 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,'" (verse 6). Can the King of Israel, at this time that was King Joram, cure a person from leprosy? Could a modern-day President of the United States cure anyone with leprosy? Certainly not!

But Jesus does! In Matthew's gospel (chapter 8), there's an instance where He cures a man with leprosy, and in Luke's gospel (chapter 17), He cures ten of them!

Only one comes back to thank Him. Remember that story? There's a lesson there for us – we ought to be grateful for all the good things He does, and keeps on doing for us – we'll hit that again before we wrap up today, though.

Well, as you can imagine, King Joram of Israel was not a happy camper! “As 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!’” (verse 7). You have to give the guy credit; at least he recognizes that he's not God! Joram realizes that he can't do the things that only God can do – cure someone from leprosy, or bring the dead back to life. Only God does that. Jesus did that – He died on the cross, was buried, and three days later came back to life, proving He is who He said He is!

We do have to read between the lines some here. King Ben-Hadad of Aram assumed that the prophet who was described by Naaman's wife's slave girl was subservient to the authority of the King of Israel, and that his services could be purchased with a substantial gift. Joram, on his part, assumes that the whole thing was being staged by Ben-Hadad to create a reason to go to war against Israel. Joram, King of Israel, was so blinded by the politics of his day, that he was unaware of God's presence in the prophet Elisha. Sometimes the things we're going through blind us to God's presence even today!

Building Relationships

“When 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,’” (verse 8). Elisha and Joram had previously met each other, and to put it mildly, they didn't get along. Joram was the son of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They were deeply involved in worshipping Baal, and leading God's people into idolatry in the northern kingdom. Joram wasn't a whole lot better than his parents with regards to loving and following God.

We talked a little last week about how parents and our parenting styles impact our children – here's another case where we see the outcomes of a dysfunctional family with priorities not aligned to Biblical standards! If you've got kids – even adult kids – and you love Jesus Christ, you should be fostering that relationship in them, too. Regularly coming to church is a great first step in doing that. Following Jesus takes dedication and commitment, and if it's only happening for an hour on Sunday morning, then a priority is messed up somewhere at home.

Elisha tells the king to send Naaman to him, so that Naaman will know that someone is speaking on God's behalf in Israel. It's not just Naaman who needs to recognize this. Joram needs to realize it, too. “So Naaman went with his horses and

chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house," (verse 9), we're told next. This is where things start to get a little confusing, at least from a human point of view.

Usually when we see someone pull in our driveway in their chariot of choice, what do we do? What do most people do? They go to the door. They open the door and greet them. They're welcomed as guests, right? We welcome them into our houses. Granted, there may be exceptions to that.

Snake Oil?

But see, Elisha told Joram to send Naaman to him. So we would assume – Naaman assumed – that he'd be greeted by Elisha the prophet. Instead notice what happens. "Elisha 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,'" (verse 10). Naaman doesn't even see Elisha the prophet! For all the pomp and pageantry of this foreign dignitary coming into town, Elisha only sends a messenger – who tells Naaman to go wash in the muddy Jordan River. It's clear to Naaman that there was no natural connection between washing in the Jordan and his desired healing.

Naaman was furious! If you've seen any old Western movies, or TV shows, he's just bought a terrible batch of snake oil. He feels like he's been hood-winked! "But 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 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," (verses 11-12) we're told. Naaman expected to be healed by a magical technique of the prophet waving his hands around him, rather than by the power of God operating through being obedient to the word of God spoken by Elisha.

We can relate to Naaman, can't we? When leaders – and those leaders could be people leading us politically, spiritually, employment-wise – when they don't do what we expect them to do, we're ready to kick them to the curb. We're ready to wash our hands of them, and not have anything to do with them because they don't meet our expectations of what a leader ought to be – in whatever arena of our lives they're supposed to be leading in. I came to the realization several years ago that I don't "run the show" so to speak. It's something that Naaman learned when he was told to wash in the Jordan seven times, and it's something a whole lot of people in our society need to realize today!

As he's fuming, Naaman's servants go to him and say, "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!'" (verse 13). He's asked to do something very minor in our eyes – to wash in the Jordan River – yet in his eyes it's a humbling experience. Naaman may have fought against the Kingdom of Israel

previously while Israel and Aram were at war. There may even be some ethnic prejudices rolled into this story for all we know.

Not What We Expect

Needless to say, it's a certainty that Naaman's idea of God working through the prophet wasn't what he expected – no booming voice, no waving hands. Just a directive given by a messenger to “Wash and be cleansed.” “So 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,” (verse 14). There's one miracle, right? The healing – the curing – of Naaman's leprosy.

Here's the second miracle – Naaman recognizing that God had been the One who did it! “Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant,’” (verse 15). Naaman's thankful for the healing, and wants to give a gift to Elisha, God's representative. That's also a very natural thing to do. When someone has treated you well, you show your gratitude. It's like going to a restaurant, having a good meal, and being served by an exemplary waitress. You give her a tip, customarily 15% of the total bill. It's just the decent, human thing to do.

Of course, now that he's cleansed – now that he's humbled himself – he's able to come face-to-face with God's representative in Israel, Elisha. As we would expect, Elisha responds. “‘As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.’ And even though Naaman urged him, he refused,” (verse 16). Elisha doesn't accept even a cent of that \$ 4,237,902 that Naaman was carrying around with him.

There are times when things happen in our lives as well. We'd be wise to be like Naaman, willing to humble ourselves to obedience to God's word. He loves us enough to send His Son to take our place on the cross. That cross is what we deserve – we are real good at making messes in our lives, of muddying the water, and even of being oppressors to others. But the Risen Jesus, He's great at cleaning us up – we'll think about this momentarily in the Sacrament of Holy Communion – and He's our help in every age, and in every stage of life, if we're humble enough to listen!

Prayer: God of new beginnings, You refresh all things in the wisdom of Jesus Christ. Make us agents of Your transforming power and heralds of Your reign of justice and peace, that all may share in the healing Christ alone brings. Amen.