

“The Ego and the Miracle”
Summer Sermon Series on Elijah and Elisha concludes
Text: II Kings 5:1-14
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*But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God”...
II Kings 5:11*

I do not want to make light of the drought that has been causing such hardship in the Southeast this summer, but I can't resist sharing with you a tongue in cheek e-mail that I received this week describing the way various church traditions are coping with the water shortage on baptism Sundays. It seems as if the Baptists have temporarily settled for sprinkling, the Methodists are using a wet wash cloth, the Presbyterians are handing out rain checks, and the Catholics are trying to turn the wine back into water!

I am glad we had enough water to fill the font here this morning. I am glad that these three little boys have been officially initiated into the household of God. Yes, there was less water in that font than they usually have in their bathtubs when they wash the dirt off after a day of busy activity, but don't let the relatively small amount of water the baptismal font holds fool you. This was a life-changing event. It will have repercussions for these three children all their lives. From this day forward, they will be identified with Christ, marked as Christ's own forever. There is nothing that can be done to remove that identity. It is the identity shared by all who are baptized by water and by the Spirit. Christian churches share the core belief that baptism is the visible, outward sign of a radically new framework for human life, a way of being in the world sustained by nothing less than Christ's own Spirit, nothing less than the Spirit of God that swept across the face of the waters when the earth was a formless void, nothing less than the Spirit of life God breathed into the nostrils of the human creature at the time of creation.

Remember your baptisms and be thankful, ministers often say, when the truth is, only some of us can remember. Some were baptized when we were teenagers, some when we were adults. Many in our tradition were baptized as infants before our capacity to remember was itself a formless void.

Over the years, I have baptized more than one baby who has actually slept through the whole thing. There he was, there she was, nestled in the sleeve of my robe, eyes closed. What a vivid, visual picture of a spiritual reality. The grace that we talk about when someone is baptized is God's grace. The promises made are not because any of us deserve them, but because God chooses to offer to us, in Christ, unconditional, everlasting love, fully and irreversibly. That is

the great miracle of human existence. No matter the age of the person being baptized, no matter how deep the water is, the message is universal: cleansing, renewal, promise, hope, identity.(1) We are buried under the water and raised again to new life in Christ.

A friend of mine some years ago, preached a sermon on the subject of baptism. He chose as his theme this Biblical idea of being divinely adopted. Here is how Patrick Wilsson explained what happens at baptism: “Christ, who is God’s Son, who shares human life, who embraces to himself brothers and sisters to follow him and to follow his way, stands before his Father’s heavenly throne saying, “Look what followed me home! Can I keep them?”

The Father answers, “Yes of course we can.”

Today’s passage from the Book of II Kings is the last of the great Old Testament Bible stories that we will study this summer. It’s a wonderful story that has to do with cleansing and hope and promise and who belongs to whom. It centers around a man from an alien land, who in a round about way, makes his way to the home of the prophet Elisha. When this man named Naaman arrives, Elisha sends out a messenger to tell the stranger to go wash in the Jordan River seven times, the very river in which, centuries later, Jesus himself would be baptized.

Naaman was a general in the Syrian army. He was successful, respected, highly favored by the leader of his nation. He had everything going for himself except for one problem, and that was his skin. It’s amazing, isn’t it, how anything can happen to anybody, at any time? Here is Naaman, at the height of his life, having to deal with a terrible disease called leprosy. In his household was the young girl who had been taken captive during one of Naaman’s military raids on Israel. She told her mistress, who in turn told Naaman, about the miraculous healing powers of a prophet in Israel, named Elisha. Naaman went to his king, and told him about the cure that was in Israel, and his king wrote a letter to the king of Israel, a letter of reference on Naaman’s behalf. (Obviously, these two kings weren’t sending raiding parties into each other’s kingdoms at this particular moment.) The letter asked if the king could provide a cure for Naaman.

Actually, there was nothing about the king that was healing. He could not have cured a case of athlete’s foot, much less leprosy, and he was very irritated when he got the letter asking him to do something that he couldn’t do. He tore his clothes and beat his chest and asked, “Am I God? This other king must be trying to embarrass me or pick a fight with me.” People who live in palaces really do have fragile egos some time. In spite of all the official miscommunication going on, the Israelite king got one thing right. When he asked, “Am I God, that I can cure someone’s leprosy?” What he got right was that God is the source of all that is good, including healing and life.

When Elisha heard that the king was running around the palace in ripped up robes, he sent word to Naaman to come to his house. Naaman came and brought all the trappings of his own importance: chariots, horses, and so on. Elisha sent out a messenger to tell him to get in the Jordan River - in and out of it – seven times. Naaman was offended to the core of his being that Elisha himself had not come out. He became very angry. It turns out that a serious disease of the skin was not Naaman's only problem; he had ego issues to deal with as well. Ego can sometimes stand in the way of one's own well-being. Have you noticed that? It's good to have an ego. It's good to care about yourself and be respectful of yourself and to expect others to treat you in a way that honors your human dignity, but sometimes you can get a little puffed up, and your sense of your own self-importance becomes your enemy. Naaman was offended. His personal pride was hurt. His national pride was injured. He asked, "Aren't the rivers of Damascus better than all the rivers in Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be clean?"

Naaman went away from Elisha's house in a rage, turning his back on his own future, turning his back on freedom from suffering, turning his back on God, the God of Israel, who was ready to help him. The water was in the river, full of cleansing, healing power for Naaman, the leper, but his pride kept him dry. In the end his servants got him back on track. They said to him, "If the prophet had asked you to do something hard you would have done it. Why not do this easy thing? Simply wash and be clean." And he did wash. And he was made clean, "according to the word of the man of God."

This is perhaps my favorite of all the stories we have heard this summer. I love the thought that it's not just the in-crowd, the usual suspects, to whom God freely offers healing, saving power. God's love has the power to cross boundaries, and the agents of God, whether they be God's prophets of old or modern day people like you and me trying to live out our discipleship, need to always have our eyes open to the reality that God's redemptive power is operative beyond the categories that we might assume are rigidly in place. Witness Naaman, the general in the enemy's army. Witness those with whom Jesus associated and to whom he offered a whole new life: tax collectors, Roman soldiers, the woman at the well, the man beside him - the criminal - on the cross: "Here, a whole new life for you."

I also love being reminded that that God really cares about human suffering. I think of Christ our Lord as "the Great Physician," the one who heals, the one who cares, the one whose power to life is stronger than all the forces of death. I love the idea that you and I are to offer ourselves in the here and now as Christ's hands to heal, his arms to embrace, his voice to comfort.

I like this story from the tales of Elisha, not so much because of Elisha, who was a very strange fellow, but because of Naaman. I know Naaman, and I think you know him too. We know what is irritating and wrong about Naaman; we know

about having our feelings hurt and taking offense. We know about the need to change our minds after we have acted angrily and in haste. We know about those times when God has been patient with us and when we have been stubborn and turned our back, when God said, "Here, I want to help you," and we answered, "No not me. I am not going to let you."

We know about finally letting go and receiving the gift that God wants to give us. Naaman's story is a wonderful antidote to human perfectionism. We grow; we change; we get to start over again and again, by the grace of God.

Anybody here want to go to the River today? There might be something in you that needs to be cured, something that needs to be washed away, something you need to let go of. I don't care what the reason is. Let's wade right in, you and I, wade in up to our knees into the everlasting love of God. (2)

Hope, promise, cleansing, renewal- all yours and mine, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

(1) Clifford Reinhold Leandro Rawlins, "Water, Source of Life. . ." *Reformed World*, March 2007, p.26.

(2) The conclusion of this sermon is based on an article by J. Mary Luti, in *Christian Century*, September 23-30, 1998, p. 859.