

“By All Means, Go!”

We’ve heard from two passages this morning. The first was from 2 Kings, the story of the healing of Naaman. The second from Luke, the story of Jesus sending out 72 witnesses (or 70 depending on your translation) to proclaim “The Kingdom of God is near.” We’ll get to the Gospel lesson in a few moments.

First, we’re gonna talk about Naaman, because that is a very interesting story. It’s one of my favorites in the Bible. It’s interesting because in the Old Testament, Israel’s whole thing is, “We’re the chosen people of God.” This was understood as having passed to Israel through the covenant God made with Abraham. Through the covenant the people of Israel thought God was always on their side. But Naaman isn’t an Israelite. Naaman is a General in the army of Aram, who led the army that defeated Israel.

On a quick side-note: In the history of Israel, somewhere along the line, the ancient scribes of the Old Testament felt it important to note that God was working in the life of an opponent of Israel. An important detail that shows us just because Israel was God’s chosen people, it doesn’t mean God stops working in the rest of the world. In this particular story God’s chosen people aren’t even the main characters. Naaman, the General from Aram, is the main character. The four people from Israel who show up in the story are all side characters in Naaman’s journey.

So what does it mean when you’re the chosen people of God, for whom God is always fighting, and God cannot be defeated... But then you’re defeated? We can answer that by saying Israel turned from God. We can answer that by saying God was angry with Israel. Neither is very comforting though. Or we can look at how God works in mysterious ways. The story of Naaman is one of those ways.

You see, while Naaman was a successful commander in the king’s army, very well regarded and valiant, as the scripture tells us, held in high regard by his king, there’s a major dilemma Naaman is facing. Naaman is a leper. His body is infected with a disease that is causing his body to decay. If the disease progresses far enough his body will begin to fall apart.

Normally this condition would cause a person to be cast out from society; at least in that day. Today we have medicines for such infections. We have antibiotics, topical creams, and all sorts of medical wonders that science has given us. Not so much in Naaman’s day though. So I’m sure he was looking for anything that would help cure him of his leprosy.

So, let’s take a look at God at work in Naaman’s life. We’ve already said he’s a leper, so we know he’s sick and his body is literally dying and slowly being eaten away by disease. We know he’s good at what he does because the King of Aram holds him in high regard. We can assume the king wants to keep him around for a bit because of this. And scripture tells us that Naaman has a servant girl from Israel, captured during a raid, working in his household.

She heard her master’s plight and shared, “If only my master would see the holy man who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

Enter an opportunity to witness; a way for God to work, even in Israel's defeat. It's a small word from a servant girl, but a word that ended up carrying so much weight. It was a small act of stepping out in faith... and the young girl didn't even know it. She was just speaking what she knew. There was a man of God living in Samaria who had performed miraculous signs. If we go back before chapter five in 2 Kings there's four such miracles practically listed. And now the girl is witnessing to the power of God through Elisha, not in an effort to convert Naaman, not to say her god is better than Naaman's god, not even to get any reward of her own. She says it out of concern for her master as she goes about her life.

Naaman hears this and a glimmer of hope builds. "Could it be that such a thing might work? Could the man of God in Samaria do what this servant girl suggests? Well, I've tried everything else. Why not go and see this prophet of God?"

Naaman takes this news to his King. He asks the King if he can travel to Samaria to see this holy man and be healed of his leprosy. We know the king holds Naaman in high regard, and we can assume the King wants to keep Naaman around for a while longer seeing as how Naaman is doing such a great job commanding the army. So it makes sense that the King's answer is, "Yes! By all means, Go! Yes, I want you healed. Yes, you're my greatest general. Yes, I want you to stay alive for a bit. Go!"

Naaman then, with the king's blessing, and a hoard of treasure, goes to Samaria to seek out the holy man the girl spoke of. Naaman goes to the King of Israel, King Joram, with a letter from the King of Aram asking for Joram to heal the King's servant Naaman. The note doesn't say anything about a holy man of God. It just asks that Naaman be healed. So when King Joram tears his clothes in despair, it's understandable. "What do you expect me to do. I'm not God to give life or death. The King of Aram is trying to pick a fight with me."

Thankfully, Elisha heard what was going on and intercedes. He tells King Joram to send Naaman to him and he'll take care of it. Naaman takes this information and goes to Elisha's house. When he gets there though, Elisha didn't even bother to come out. Elisha sends his servant out with the command, go and wash in the Jordan River seven times.

Stop and think about this for a moment. You've got a five star General, who led the army of the country that defeated your country, coming to your house. He's there by your invitation, hoping to be healed, and you don't even go outside to say, "Hi."

Naaman's ego couldn't really take that. "Do you realize who I am? Do you know how important I am? Do you know that I'm the one who defeated your country for my King? And you're not even gonna come out and greet me? You're not gonna invoke the name of your God and wave your hand over the leprosy and make it go away?"

"And really, the Jordan River? The Jordan River is filthy and nasty. I could go home and wash in one of the beautiful Damascus rivers. And you want me to bathe in the Jordan? Really?"

How many times have we asked for a word from God? How many times have we said, "If you could just help me with this"? How many times has God answered us through whatever means God answers us, and we go, "Really? You want me to do that? Come on?"

But then Naaman's servant speaks a word of sense into Naaman. He says, "Let's think about this for a second before you go running off in a rage and continue on with your leprosy and eventually die from the infection. If Elisha himself came out of the house and told you to go in do any number of great and difficult tasks, would you have done it?"

Naaman agrees he would've done the tasks.

"Well then how difficult is it to dip yourself in a river seven times?"

Realizing that his servant was making sense, Naaman went and washed in the Jordan. He washed in the Jordan River seven times. When he came out, he was healed. Naaman had new skin; skin like that of a young boy.

The miracle was allowed to happen, but not because of anything that Naaman did. Not because of his stubbornness, or his greatness, or anything that Naaman offered. The miracle was allowed to happen because of who God is, who can work in the simplest ways.

What happens next was not read in scripture this morning. Naaman went to Elisha attempting to pay him from the treasures he brought from the King of Aram. After Elisha said no, Naaman then asked for two mule loads of earth to take back with him. Naaman told Elisha, "let me do this because I'm not going to worship the God in Aram anymore. For now I know there is a God in Israel who is the God of all." The only exception he asked forgiveness for was when he goes with his King and his King leans on his arm and Naaman has to bend down to support the King.

So there was one witness of one servant girl, Naaman, a General in the army of the enemy, is now a servant of the Lord. The tables turn so easily at times just by what we can say, what we can offer, what we can do in faithfulness. And it didn't take a whole lot. It was just a servant girl being a servant girl, living her life, doing her job, knowing what she knew. And what she knew was, "There's a holy man in Samaria, a prophet of God, who I know can heal my master." And she shared that. No powerful ritual or anything like that. Just a servant girl being herself.

It also wasn't the people of Israel keeping to themselves and shunning whoever was not of the covenant. Like today, sometimes we shun people cause of who they are, the way they look or act, the things they do. "Well those people drink a lot, so we don't want anything to do with them." "Well, they play football. I don't like football. So I'm not even gonna talk to them."

But division is not God's way. It doesn't matter who we are. God still calls to us. God still comes to us in some way. Even Jesus told his disciples there were plenty of people who weren't the children of Israel who the prophets of old healed and ministered to. In Luke 4 starting with verse 24 Jesus says:

²⁴ "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

Even Jesus is saying, “Don’t get caught up in who’s who. Just go and proclaim the word. Just go and live your life and share what you know.”

So when he’s commissioning the 70 (or 72) witnesses to go out and proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven is near, that’s all he’s saying. Go out, be you, and proclaim the good news. Don’t worry about who you’re talking to. Just go out to the towns and offer your peace. Whoever your peace rests on, that’s who you go to.

The thing is, the witnesses were not to take anything with them and not to be the hosts. Do you know what that means culturally? It means the witnesses were not the ones in charge. The witnesses had to meet people where they were.

The servant girl in Naaman’s home? She wasn’t looking for anything special. She was simply where she was. But she met Naaman where he was. She met Naaman in his need.

Elijah and Elisha? When they performed their miracles, they met the people in their need. They met them in the pain and in their despair.

That’s what the Gospel is about. It’s about meeting people in their need. Just take what you know. Be who you are. Proclaim the good news. The Kingdom of God is near.

Does that require ritual? No. Does that require a theological degree? Well, maybe if you wanna stand up in front and wear the fancy robes. Otherwise, no.

What is it to simply have a conversation with someone? What is it to go into town, and just talk to someone and see where they are, who they are, what they’re about? That’s why Paul’s ministry was so effective. He would go into town and he would study what the people were about and what they were doing.

If you look in the book of Acts, there’s a story about how Paul goes into a town and sees that there is an altar to an unknown god. He says, “Ok, that’s my opportunity. This is what these people are about. New experiences and learning about new ways the universe might work.” He goes to the people and says, “Let me tell you about this unknown god you have an altar to.”

John Wesley... Do you know why his ministry was so successful? It’s because he went to the people in the fields. He went to the people working the land. He went to the taverns. He went to all of those to whom the Church of England said, “You’re not good. We don’t want you. You can’t afford to pay for your pew. So we’re going to look down on you and we are going to be the holy people of God.”

That didn’t work. That is not how God works.

So John Wesley went to them. He went to where the people were. He went and he said, “Let me tell you about the love of Jesus. Let me tell you about the Love of God. Not what the church is telling you. Not what the denomination is saying about this group or that group. Let me tell you about the unconditional, ever-present, ever-surrounding us, ever-going-with-us-and-empowering-us love of God.” And now, a couple hundred years later, we are here in a United Methodist Church

because John Wesley decided to speak from love. He decided to go out as one of those commissioned by Jesus to those who needed to hear a word.

That's what the commissioning means. That's what it is to go out in Jesus name. Not to be judgmental. Not to be held back. Not to worry about ritual or correctness, or worry about who is who, or where they're from. It's simply to meet people where they are. People needing to hear something new, needing to hear something positive, wanting to hear something real, and wanting to be in relationship with a God who loves them. Not a god who judges them. Not a god who says you're not good enough.

They want to hear from a God who says, "I love you, I accept you, I cherish you. Come and be part of my family for who you are and for all the grace and gifts I can give you. Come and share the blessings of God."

As we go out, back into the world, back into our lives living as who we are, let us carry that same message as commissioned by Christ. Go out into the world and tell your neighbors, "Peace be with you." Figure out where your neighbors are, what makes them tick, what their need is, and then as Jesus did with all the outcast of Israel and all the outcast of the world, meet them where they are, in their need. Minister to them in that place. And when the opportunity comes? "Let me tell you about the God who loves you. Let me tell you about Jesus Christ. Let me tell you about coming home to your family.

In Jesus name, Amen.