

THE GOD OF ISRAEL IS THE GOD OF ALL

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this third Sunday of the Epiphany season:

Then he returned to the man of Elohim, he and all his company, and he came and stood before his face; and he said, "Behold! Now I know that (there are) no elohim in all the earth (except) the One in Israel..."¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Today, you have heard of the One True God's grace in stretching forth His mighty Hand to defend His people against all our enemies, and to present us clean before Him. Those truths began in earnest to be declared with the Introit Psalm and were carried through the Gospel reading. This year, the Word has come together into our ears, hearts and minds, to declare to us that that One True God Who earlier appeared as the God of Israel, has now proclaimed Himself, in the crucified and risen Son, Jesus, to be the God over all that which is in heaven, on earth and under the earth.

The Old Covenant reading for this day declares, through the confession of commander Naaman, that the God of Israel is the God of all. His confession, "*Behold! Now I know that (there are) no elohim in all the earth (except) the One in Israel...*" can be, if it has not yet been, our, and your, confession of the Faith. It declares trust in God to cleanse us from sin and all its effects.

Every person ever conceived by the will of man through the instrument of woman, began in an inherited state of uncleanness before God. Not one person born of the united substances of man and woman could stand on their own merits for one moment before the living God without being consumed by His glory. It is only through the proclaimed Word of God that anyone, and all of us, may declared clean, pure and holy that we might remain in God's Presence now and forever. That is a lesson Naaman learned long ago. It is one which is still to be learned in each generation.

¹ II Kings 5:15a.

In our human essence and substance, we were (and a few may be now) in the state before God in which Naaman was found some 27 centuries ago. We existed in that sinful existence until God's Word came upon us. This He has chosen to do through simple, mediated means – preaching and hearing; water and Word; confession and absolution.

Like Commander Naaman, you may have had times of doubt concerning God's choosing to work through simple earthly elements to declare His cleansing and His will for those whom He has saved. Such doubts are sinful. They betray a lack of trust in the Creator God to work His will according to His chosen, yet plentiful, earthly instruments.

For many years, most of you have heard the narrative of Naaman's hearing and experiencing the Word of God which cleansed him. It was read publicly here in the years 2014, 2012, 2009, and 2007.² A side question: why has the true story of Naaman's leprosy and cleansing not come into our ears every year?

The Epiphany season which focuses upon God's displaying His mighty hand in our incarnate Lord, Jesus, expands or contracts due to the annually shifting date of the Feast of the Resurrection, Easter. This is one of the longer Epiphany seasons in the last decade. In those longer seasons, we celebrate the power of God in the Incarnate Christ in the set readings (outside the Antiphon or Psalm) for Epiphany 3, the Word begins with a narration of a true story.

It is not simply a spiritual account. It is one that is very physical and earthly, both in its content and meaning. The King of Aram (Syria) was a real person who ruled at a specific time in history. We may discern that he was Ben-Haddad II (860-841 B.C.). Naaman, the mighty man of valor, has his name is recorded in texts outside the Scriptures (Mari and Ugaritic texts). It means "pleasantness." (Hold that in your mind as you reflect on the text). The unnamed Israelite king mentioned in the text, is one who ruled in the North about 125 years before its fall. We can surmise that he was King

² They would have been read on Epiphany III, 2011, but the texts were moved to those for the Confession of St. Peter in honor of Pastor Pacey's fifth anniversary of installation, tenth anniversary of ordination.

Jehoram. Elisha is the mediator to whom Naaman is sent. With some research, we have determined that he preached during the rules of Ben-Haddad II and Jehoram.

Now, you don't need to know all that to be saved. Yet, it is helpful to hear that recounting of names and coinciding time periods so that we might hear this text as being grounded on earth, all the while having heavenly overtones. We can learn from these things that that God can, and may choose to help a whole nation for one person's sake, and to help one person for an entire nation's sake.

We may understand that a whole nation might be blessed by that one's conversion and confession of the Faith. When the rest of the story goes beyond today's text, it begins to make clear the truth that one devout "Naaman" among a ruler's counselors can be God's agent for much good.

From that we dive into the day's text which, at its heart, declares that the God of Israel is the God of all. It begins with a proclamation that the Lord of heaven and earth had literally "gifted" victory to the ancient nation of Aram (Syria). This He did through the leadership of one whom the Scripture declares to be a, "great man."

Even so, this, "mighty man of valor," was afflicted with a disease that would, however slowly, result in his death. Naaman was not an Israelite, subject to the Mosaic ceremonial cleanliness laws. Unlike the leper Jesus cleansed in today's Gospel reading, that Syrian commander would not have had to remain outside the city, camp, or temple of his gods. Naaman had no religious or social need to show himself to the priests should he be healed of his disease. On the other hand, to the Jews, and before the One True God, that mighty man of valor was unclean on account of having been born and living apart from God's covenant.

To his own people, and his king, he was a great man, a commander who could win battles. On account of that – which the Word tells us was God's gift – he was valued despite his disease. In addition, he appears to be of such a good, pleasant character in his own circles that even his wife's slave girl took pity on him. She expressed a confession of the Faith that declared, even though this man was not of Israel, the God of Israel Who is

the God of all could effect his cure. What reason, other than his beneficent, pleasant nature did that slave girl have to motivate her to direct him to God's mediator in that time for a cure? We have heard how she entered Naaman's household:

Aram went out on their raids and carried off from (the) land of Israel (a) little maid, and she was before the face of Naaman's wife.³

Consider that which the narrative indicates about that girl. She is described as small, insignificant or little, a captive. The Word deliberately contrasts her smallness with Naaman's greatness. Out of her humble enslaved status, she declares the Faith. She expresses a hope in God's grace and mercy which, if Naaman does not reject them, will bring about his cure. God used the confession and faith of that small, insignificant girl, bound to service in Naaman's household, to move that great man to tell the king who was depending upon him that there was a prophet in Samaria who would cure him of his leprosy. From this we learn how God can take the most unwelcome circumstances in which His people may be cast to bring about His good and gracious will.

The king of Aram (Syria), who values Naaman's service, acts in the manner of rulers who desire to keep in service their faithful subordinates. He sends Naaman off, loaded with gifts, not to some Israelite underling (think here of the prophet whom the little girl had confessed), but to the king of Israel. It appears his thinking was typical of Syrian rulers of that era – the prophets in a given land were responsible to their king, and thus would do as commanded.

In human reality, Naaman is sent to buy his cleansing – salvation from his deadly disease. Of course, the king of Israel knows that the true prophets of God work at no king's bidding. (After all, he was a son of wicked king Ahab. You may recall that king persecuted the prophets. When he was killed, the prophecy that the dogs would lick up his blood came true).

The king, Ahab's son, fears political retribution for not being able to cure Naaman. He knew he did not have power to order God's prophets to bend to the king's will. He

³ *II Kings 5: 2.*

had learned that God's grace cannot be bought by humans, no matter how powerful were their earthly rules.

Scripture elsewhere informs us that king followed the evil ways of Ahab.⁴ He had turned the people to worship of golden calves in Bethel and Dan. (Yes, about six centuries had passed from the worship of the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, and the people were again turned to worshipping cattle – because it was easier than going all the way to Jerusalem to worship in the Presence of the Living God).

When faced with the king of Aram's demand for healing Naaman, the king of Israel rends his clothes in a public display of dismay. This news spread throughout Samaria. It ends up in the ears of the prophet Elisha. He is the messenger of God residing in that land. He resides not at the Temple constructed there with the golden calves. Rather, the prophet did not go to the king, nor to the place of idol worship. Elisha, residing in his home apart from the center of false religion in Israel says to the king concerning Naaman:

*"Let him come to me, that he may know there is (a) prophet in Israel."*⁵

Naaman heads off to the prophet's house in a great show, without any display of humility; quite the opposite in fact. His arrival is used to show Naaman's importance and give a clear indication to Elisha that he is, in himself, worthy of the prophet's help. For a lesser man, one who was uncertain of his Divine Call, this approach could have been very intimidating. Is this not how some of us, afflicted by the leprosy of sin, approach God – "You have to answer my prayers: look how important I am, see what I can do for You?"

Against that thinking, Elisha sends a messenger. He neither invites Naaman in, nor even comes to the door himself. Is this simply the act of a prophet putting an arrogant petitioner in his place? Or, is it because the Spirit of God dwelt with the prophet? Remember, the mighty man of valor was unclean by both birth and physical disease, he could not enter into the Presence of the Divine without being consumed.

⁴ II Kings 3.

⁵ II Kings 5:8b.

The text, and the surrounding texts call for Faith in this pagan sick man. The prophet calls for trust in the Word of God. He gives no room for considering any merit to the human attempt to purchase the gifts God bestows.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, keep this in mind as we strive in the Faith to discern God's will for this congregation. We must not approach God with collective thoughts that indicate what we have done things such as these: we have paid off the mortgage; we have increased the building fund to nearly double what it was before we closed the mortgage; we have undertaken diligent planning; we have a beautiful building plan; God should give us that which we want. (That would be a lot of wee wee talk, would it not)?

Rather, let us approach God, through His chosen means, in humility, as Naaman learned. Let us remember the revealed will of God – to bring us to repentance, that He might heal, bless and raise up those who are broken by sin – including the sins of not trusting Him to provide for all we need to receive His gifts as one Body in one place. Let us turn our thoughts to those such as these: God has paid off our mortgage; God has increased the building fund to nearly double what it was before; God has led us into diligent planning; God has given us a beautiful building plan through a faithful architect. Through all of this, God is giving us that which we truly need – places and times each week to receive His gracious gifts through simple means.

Just as Naaman learned to trust, through the confession of his servants, in the Word of the Lord, let us do so. As Naaman learned that God would work His will on account of His Word, on account of Who He is, let us remember that God wills to do good for those who call upon Him in the Faith. We are free from becoming frustrated when we ask for something and God turns us back to waiting in His Word and Sacraments. (Remember, Baptism is foreshadowed in Naaman's washing today).

If the Word today has brought you to the point of repentance – for impatience in waiting on us to walk together in important decisions concerning His Church in this place – take comfort. For God's Gospel turns the faithful to Christ, Who has the power to bring forgiveness, and Who will work God's will among us.

Your sins are forgiven on account of the death of Christ Jesus. You are free to emulate Naaman's repentance. We are free to confess like Naaman:

*"Behold! Now I know that (there are) no elohim in all the earth (except) for the One in Israel..."*⁶

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Epiphany III (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 97:1, Antiphon Ps. 97:7b-8; II Kings 5:1-15a; Romans 12:16-21; Matthew 8:1-13

January 22, 2017

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Soli Deo Gloria

⁶ II Kings 5:15a.