

“There Is a Prophet in Israel”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 4, 2018

24th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 30

Rev. John Wahl

2 Kings 5:1-14

In today's reading, we have reached yet another turning point in our journey through the Old Testament. For the last two weeks, we focused on David and Solomon, father and son, the two great kings of Israel's monarchy. Their conquests, building projects, and lasting stories represent the pinnacle of Israel's power and close relationship with God. But, from this point forward, after the monarchy and its power has risen and begins to fall, it is the prominent voice of prophets – and not monarchs – that will emerge.

In the Old Testament story, prophets were also near to God, but played a much different role. It was the prophets who would speak truth to power; act out God's faithfulness, love and justice; and announce the God's vision for a restored and abundant world. Today, we meet the prophet Elisha:

Read 2 Kings 5:1-14

Do you remember the *Staples* ads with the big, red “Easy” button, where mountains of organizational office tasks are decimated by one efficient office manager, who remarks, “that was easy!” These days, things seem to be trending to the quick and easy. From fast food to on-line banking to speed dating; hand-written notes have given way to short texts. If a task is too cumbersome or time-consuming, we shy away and look for an alternative.

At the same time, though, if something seems *too* easy, we don't trust it. We want the uncomplicated path, but deep-down, we know *life ain't easy*. It's a mixed message, isn't it? When important things come too quickly, we are suspicious – waiting for the next shoe to drop. After all, isn't the good stuff in life worth the wait and made better with extra effort?

This is the sort of paradox that we find in today's reading. Naaman, the great Aramean warrior, is offered a solution to his problem by an Israeli prophet, but the prescription seems too easy; too good to be true. As we will see, it will take a lot of convincing to get Naaman to hear and understand the healing power of God that is voiced through the prophet Elisha.

Naaman is introduced as a “great man” – successful, respected and victorious in battle; even recently over Israel. Yet, this mighty warrior suffers from leprosy – a disease that causes both physical pain and social stigma. In that day, leprosy was considered to be a physical sign of moral transgression: it was a curse from God.

We are not told how Naaman has tried to cure his leprosy prior to this episode; but we can assume that if he is taking the advice of his wife’s servant, he was probably near the end of his rope. Based on her recommendation, and with the support of his king, Naaman seeks out the help of the prophet in Israel on the other side of the Jordan River.

When the king of Israel receives the letter from the king of Aram, he panics. After tearing his clothes, the Hebrew king demurs, asking, “Am I God...to cure a man of his leprosy?” (v. 7) When this news came to Elisha, he sent word telling the king that he should send Naaman to him. He reminds the king of Israel that this is an opportunity to demonstrate to Naaman, the foreigner, that “there is a prophet in Israel.” (v. 8)¹

Naaman traveled to the house of the prophet Elisha with all the trappings of power and wealth. But even that could not get Elisha to come out of his house; sending instead a messenger with instructions to go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and the skin disease would be taken away. There is no expensive cure; no grueling treatment regimen; simply, *wash and be clean* – it is too easy!

Maybe not surprisingly, then, these instructions anger Naaman. His sense of status and protocol was offended. He thought the prophet would personally come out, maybe wave a wand and pronounce healing in the name of God; but he gets none of that. Enraged, Naaman turns around and goes away.²

Here, more improbable voices show up in the story. Some of Naaman’s servants are bold enough to admonish their leader, telling him that if the messenger of the prophet had asked Naaman to do something really hard, he would have done it; thinking that surely a cure would come through an arduous trial. How much more reason to do the simple thing, dipping his body in the Jordan River. The general listens to them, takes his bath, and comes out clean – his leprosy is gone.

¹ Karla Suomala from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Stephen Reid from *WorkingPreacher.com*

In the verses that follow, Naaman will return to Elisha's house to confess his new-found faith in the God of Israel and to offer some re-payment for the cure that he has received, but the prophet refuses; instead telling Naaman simply to "go in peace." (v. 19) Maybe this is because Elisha doesn't want the foreigner's money: spoils, maybe, of Aram's victory over Israel; maybe this is the reason Elisha didn't want to come out of the house the first time Naaman came.

But, possibly, instead, Elisha did not want the focus to be on him – the renowned prophet of God – but on God, and on those unnamed others that God had placed into this story in order to bring healing, even to an enemy of the people of Israel. Naaman's journey to health would not have been possible without several ordinary people intervening on his behalf. Without the young slave girl who tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, about the prophet in the land of Israel, there is no healing. Without Elisha's messenger, delivering instructions to Naaman about washing in the Jordan, there is no healing. And without the general's servants, saying, *why don't you at least give it a try?* there would be no healing.³

All of these unnamed individuals play instrumental roles in this story of a man's healing; and the God who was behind the words and actions of Elisha and all the other people who were contributors to Naaman's restoration to health. But, as easy as the healing act is described to be – simply washing in the Jordan River – behind it are all the difficult roles that can sometimes be required of God's healing agents in the world. When we follow the rule of love; that we are to love our neighbors – all of our neighbors, even our enemies – bearing their burdens, doing what is right; it can be not easy at all!

It is hard for us, as Christians, to read this story about being cleansed in the waters of the Jordan River without thinking about baptism. The vows that are recited, whenever a baptism is celebrated or remembered, include the promise to help nurture others in their faith. This might sound easy, but sometimes we find ourselves in over our heads. Like the king of Israel in this story, who tears his clothes, we might wonder, *who are we to heal? who are to work on behalf of our enemies? who are we to bring about justice?*⁴

When we live seeking to fulfill our baptismal vows; when we seek to follow the rule of love; we sometimes have to wade in even when the waters seem rough; when the way will be difficult, and not easy. Visiting the sick is hard – especially when we don't have all the answers. Giving our money is hard – especially if it

³ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, "Trickle-Down Health Care? The Politics of 2 Kings 5:1-14"

⁴ Christy Lohr Sapp, "Dip Into Justice"

means having less for ourselves. Praying with and for others is hard – especially if it means facing up to our own shortcomings.

But the good news is that we are not called to fill these vows alone. No one of us might feel capable of offering healing, but as much as we entrust our own health to the medical doctor with expertise and experience, anyone who has been in the hospital knows that it is the nurses, the technicians, the lab workers, the cleaning staff and the cafeteria workers who make a hospital a place of real healing. We may not have an “Easy” button, but each of us has some role to play in God’s vision of a restored and abundant world; not just the prophets who announce it. Without the messengers, the truth-tellers, and the ones willing to point out the overlooked easier way, this healing is not possible. Without human agents, often unnamed or unrecognized, the full measure of healing is not possible.

We need not look far to see this truth revealed: for the Pittsburgh doctor and some nurses who operated on the Tree of Life shooter were themselves Jew. It has been reported that even his wounds were being tended, the shooter was shouting anti-Semitic slurs; and that the hospital staff said afterward that they were proud to offer medical care to a human who was wounded, because they has answered God’s call to love.

Easy? Definitely not. But is this the challenge to which the people of God, praying and hoping for a restored and abundant world, have been called? Most certainly, yes. AMEN.