

7-6-25 Sermon: “All Wrong” - 2 Kings 5:1-17

This morning’s Old Testament reading, the healing of Naaman, is a story where everything is done all wrong.

First of all, Elisha heals the wrong person.

Naaman is an enemy. And he’s not just any enemy – Naaman is the commander of the army of the King of Aram, a neighboring country that is regularly at war with Israel. Notice: There is a young Israelite girl living in Naaman’s house, and the narrator makes a point to tell us the Arameans took her captive on one of Naaman’s raids into Israel.

Taking young girls captive and making them slaves in your home? Naaman is not a nice guy! He is public enemy number one, Israel’s most wanted, and it sounds like a human trafficker to boot! Why on *earth* does Elisha heal this guy? This *is all wrong*.

Second, Elisha heals Naaman in the wrong way! Naaman is a big man in Aram, so he expects a big welcome when he gets to the prophet’s house. But Elisha does not even come to the door to greet him. Instead, he sends a messenger to tell Naaman what to do: Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and you shall be clean.

This response makes Naaman very angry. And even as we’ve established that he’s not a nice guy (and now we’re learning he’s got a bit of an ego!), we can understand why he’s upset. He has traveled all this way, into enemy territory, and then Elisha can’t even be bothered to come to the door...? That’s rude, Elisha – surely your mother raised you better than that! And then, the instructions the messenger relays to Naaman are somewhat ludicrous, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times.”

First off, I have been to the Jordan River. And let me tell, it hardly deserves to be called a river; it’s more like a very muddy creek. Naaman is *right* when he says, “This is ridiculous – aren’t the rivers of Damascus better than this dinky little river in Israel?” But more than that, Naaman has leprosy – a lifelong skin disease. He is here seeking healing from a prophet he’s been told can help him; he didn’t come all the way to Israel for a bath.

And then, when he is healed, Naaman’s *response* to the healing is all wrong! He stands before Elisha, tries to shower him with lavish gifts, and confesses his faith in the God of Israel. And then, in a comical gesture, he asks to take two mule-loads of Israel’s dirt home with him so that he can worship Israel’s God back home in Aram. Many in this time believed that gods were tied to the lands of their peoples, so Naaman thinks he will better worship Israel’s God if he can do so on some transported Israelite soil.

Which makes me want to say, “Hey, Naaman, if you want worship Israel’s God, did you ever think about maybe – I don’t know – not waging war anymore against God’s people and taking their children captive?” Just a thought. But “no” is the answer; that did not occur to Naaman. Within two chapters, the Israelites and the Arameans are back at war, and the status quo goes on.

This is a fascinating story, isn’t it? Everything is indeed done all wrong. And yet in the end Naaman is healed, and God is worshipped. And somehow this story makes it into the Scriptures, into a book that future generations will come to call the Bible, the Gospel, the *good news*.

An enemy general gets his healing, even after throwing a hissy fit, and then life continues as usual. *Is this story good news?*

Even stranger, perhaps, than the story itself is the fact that Jesus uses Naaman as an example in his very first sermon.

We heard that sermon a moment ago. Jesus is preaching at the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown; it's the inauguration speech for his ministry. And he tells the story of Naaman as a word of caution. Speaking to friends, family, proud neighbors who watched him grow up, he says, "Don't expect, just because I'm one you, that you're going to like the gospel I preach. Remember, there were plenty of lepers that needed healing in Israel, and yet Elisha the prophet chose to heal Naaman, the commander of the enemy army."

The people of Nazareth get it, and they don't appreciate this story. Like Naaman himself, they are enraged. They decide that Jesus, too, is all wrong, and the attentive congregation turns into an angry mob that drives Jesus out of town and tries to throw him off a cliff! This story sure doesn't sound like *good news*.

Naaman's story confronts us with the hard truth that sometimes the grace of God is downright offensive. It defies our expectations, our sense of morality, our understanding of how the world works. God's grace is *too* inclusive, too radical, too...persistent. Sometimes, we see God's grace in the world, all we can say is, "That's not fair," and "God, I disagree."

And yet, this hard truth may also be the good news. That when everything *is* all wrong, the grace of God comes anyway. Grace that thwarts and exceeds our expectations. Grace that is utterly dependent on God and not one drop dependent on us. No matter what we do or how dark our world gets, God refuses to stop showing up.

And maybe this is the good news we need right now because so much in our world is going all wrong. This week has left many in our Taos community suddenly staring into an abyss. Many of our neighbors – some of us! – are wondering what will happen to their food assistance or their health insurance. All of us are worried about what will happen to our hospital. Parents in Texas are searching desperately for their children who have been washed away by floods, meanwhile children in Gaza continue to starve: friends this world we live in is *not* the world as God intended it!

There is plenty of reason to despair in our world. This we know full well. But the good news of this difficult story is that God's grace is relentless and shows up anyway. Not where or how we expect it. It might show up in an enemy. In a muddy creek. In a piece of bread, or a sip of juice. In a bath. In a song sung, a word whispered, a hug or a squeeze of the hand. In a meal cooked, a sign written, a child comforted. A leper healed.

We don't get to choose where and how that grace shows up. All we get to choose is whether not to receive it, and to respond to God's call to participate in it.

God's grace refuses to be tamed by our expectations and desires – which is a little infuriating, and surely offensive. But grace refuses to stop showing up. Healing comes. Goodness comes. Love comes...no matter what.

Even when everything is all wrong. Thanks be to God.