

February 15, 2009

Epiphany 6

*“Ordinary Water and a Mighty God”*

---

## **2 KINGS 5:1-14**

---

**N**ow Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. <sup>2</sup> Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup> Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. <sup>5</sup> "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. <sup>6</sup> The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." <sup>7</sup> As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" <sup>8</sup> When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." <sup>9</sup> So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup> Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." <sup>11</sup> But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. <sup>12</sup> Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. <sup>13</sup> Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" <sup>14</sup> So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

*I am holding in my hand a bucket of water, some soap and a towel that can be used for washing my hands. Water and soap can get the dirt off my hands but it does not have the power to heal a blister, or mend a broken finger, or take away the pain of arthritis.*

When Naaman washed seven times in the waters of the Jordan River the spot of leprosy that threatened to cover his body was completely removed. His flesh was restored to that of a young man. The waters of the Jordan River had power to heal because the word of the Lord spoken through Elisha guaranteed such a healing if he washed seven times.

The Lord our God has a way of taking something ordinary like water and attaching a blessing to it. We think of how we were washed with ordinary water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In that moment of time God used ordinary water connected

with his Word to wash away sin, give you the Holy Spirit, and create new life in you. We think of how the Lord our God used an ordinary wooden cross, an instrument of torture, to be the place where Jesus miraculously paid for the sin of the world. We stand in awe this morning at how the Lord can take an ordinary piece of unleavened bread and ordinary wine, and give us his body and blood with the words, "Take eat this is my body" and "Take drink this is my blood."

Let's take a trip to the Jordan River this morning and watch in amazement as ordinary water combines with the power of a mighty God to heal a man whose body had the dreaded disease of leprosy.

### **Sin destroys our lives**

This man Naaman saw his life threatened and destroyed by the terrible disease of leprosy. He was commander of the army of the king of Aram, highly regarded, a five star general with all the perks. It says in our text that "he was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy." The man who appeared invincible was mortal. He had leprosy! This past week there was a picture of the pop star Michael Jackson with a mask on his face. There is speculation that he may have a flesh eating disease which he is trying to cover by wearing masks in public. See the body of Naaman. It has a spot of leprosy. It is spreading and there is no cure.

Ah, but there is hope. It comes in the form of young girl, a Hebrew girl, once captured by the Syrian army, now serving Naaman's wife. The young girl sees her master and his wife stressing out over the leprosy that is getting worse each day. "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." What an amazing girl this was! While other children from Israel despised the true God and worshipped Baal and other gods, she kept her faith in the true God, even though she was torn away from her home and family. While boys her age mocked the name of Elisha with the cruel words, "Go up you bald head, go up!" she praised the name of Elisha to her mistress convinced of his power as a true prophet of God.

The word of God is so powerful, especially on the lips of a young child. It reaches into the life of this army captain, this five star general with leprosy. He goes to the king of Aram his commander in chief asking for a permission letter to visit the king of Israel and make contact with this prophet Elisha. He takes money with him, lots of money, ten talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing. At our current prices that amounts to about 2 million in gold, and about \$15000 in silver. This large sum of money shows how desperate he was for a cure, and how much hope he had in the words the servant girl has shared about the true God and the prophet Elisha.

The king of Israel reads the letter from king of Aram delivered by Naaman. He goes into a tizzy and a conniption fit and whines pathetically, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" The last thing on this king's twisted mind is to suggest that Naaman visit Elisha and learn about the true God of Israel! The word went out into the community. The king of Israel tore his robes! The king is upset. He doesn't know what to do. Maybe there will be more war! The sky is falling the sky is falling! Who will bail us out of this mess?

The word gets out and then it reaches the ears of the prophet Elisha. He sends a message to the distressed, distraught, debauched and defiant king, "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know there is a prophet in Israel." Elisha wants the voice of the true God to be heard. He is not ashamed to be the true prophet of God even if he is hated by the people and despised by the king of Israel.

Here comes Naaman to Elisha's humble abode in his fancy chariot, with his soldiers on horses and mules carrying the gold, silver and expensive clothes. Elisha does not even bother to come to the door. Elisha what are you doing? This was no way to treat the top brass, the five star general of Syria, unless you are true prophet of God and you want to see this man come to know the true God.

Naaman is incensed, livid with anger, boiling in rage. Did you hear about the guy they arrested this past week who was trying to ram a truck with his Toyota Camry and then it ran off the road and strike a pole? Listen to the rage in Naaman. "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharparm the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters in Israel? Couldn't I wash in the them and be cleansed?" The Syrian people were proud of the rivers that came from the back side of the mountains of Lebanon, flowed through their city with fresh, clean water, especially in the spring after the snow melt.

Naaman wants a cure, but he wants the cure on his own terms. That reminds us of the man that once came to Jesus by night, a religious leader of the Jewish people, Nicodemus by name. He wanted Jesus to give him advice on how he could improve his status with the Lord. Jesus told him, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." God's way of saving us is totally different from the way in which we were born into this world.

To illustrate how different we think from God's way of thinking, let me talk to you about something called "mirror imaging." Mirror imaging means looking in the mirror and trying to imagine what someone else is going through in times of conflict and crisis. There are some who say the reason we have a hard time dealing with terrorists is that we are prone to project an image of how we treat people into the way their minds act and think. How can I ever begin to look into a mirror and understand how a woman straps bombs on her body and kills 40 other women and children as happened this past week in Baghdad?

When it comes to my relationship with God I am born into this world thinking I can look into a mirror at myself, and then understanding on my own how God loves me and accepts me. I know from personal experience that if I treat other people kindly, for the most part they will do the same for me. I am programmed by sin to think God operates the same way. If I do things that please God he will reward me with blessings in this life and blessings in the life to come. Warren Buffet said a few years ago that he was putting a large amount of his wealth into the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation because he wanted to earn a better life in the future. Mirror imaging fails when it comes to knowing the true God on several counts. First, it fails to see how damaging sin is. Sin is much more than a few spots that make us look bad in the eyes of other people. Sin makes us totally unacceptable to God. The prophet Isaiah said, "We are altogether unclean." Because we like to look at God the way we look at ourselves we foolishly think a little good here and there will cause

the problem of sin to go away. We also fail to comprehend how God wants to save us his way, just as Naaman thought God's plan to have him wash in the Jordan was inferior to washing in the rivers of Damascus. In Isaiah 55 the Lord tells us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

### **God's mighty miracle of cleansing saves us**

One of Naaman's servants pleaded with him to give it a try. "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, than, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" Naaman gives it a try. He washes according to the word of the Lord spoken by Elisha the prophet, seven times in the Jordan River, not six, not the rivers of Damascus, but the waters of the Jordan. His flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. It was totally free. It did not cost him one gold or silver coin. Human reason says, "What must I do to be saved? What great things can I do to rescue myself?" God's Word simple calls on us to be clean in the blood of Jesus. Trust the simple truth that the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin, and your sin from your past life will be wiped clean, and you will have eternal life.

God's ways are certainly not our ways. When it comes to baptism I am inclined to think that this washing with water is a good work that I do for the Lord, or some way of showing my loyalty to God, or fulfilling some ordinance from God. But then the Lord enables you and me to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to his word this is a special washing of water with the word that cleanses, and saves, and gives us the Holy Spirit and gives us new birth and buries us with Christ. God also miraculously found a way to give us Jesus' body and blood with simple, ordinary bread and wine. That seems impossible, but then as Jesus told his disciples, "With God all things are possible." Naaman found the impossible to be true and so have you. Amen.