

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Sunday, July 04, 2010**

II Kings 5

(PART I)

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." 7When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

8But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." 9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 11But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! 12Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. 13But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" 14So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

(PART II)

15Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." 16But he said, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. 17Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. 18But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count." 19He said to him, "Go in peace."

But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, 20Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, "My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something out of him."

21 So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is everything all right?" 22 He replied, "Yes, but my master has sent me to say, 'Two members of a company of prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.'" 23 Naaman said, "Please accept two talents." He urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi. 24 When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.

25 He went in and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" He answered, "Your servant has not gone anywhere at all." 26 But he said to him, "Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? 27 Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever." So he left his presence leprous, as white as snow.

*What Do Naaman the Syrian, Ludwig der Springer, and We ... Have in Common?*

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

*What Do Naaman the Syrian, Ludwig der Springer, and We ... Have in Common?*

You have to admit that is one great sermon title!?

In fact, it might be the best thing about this sermon, which if that is so, just hang onto the title and pack it away in your memory somewhere.

It came to me last Monday when I was going over the readings for today. Homiletically, the Summer Months can be the dull, boring, and dry time of the Church Year ... the readings are often those most Pastors avoid by going on vacation and leaving the texts to supply Preachers ... often the stories are not exciting and if they are, they are what we call "non-preach-able texts."

But then I read the appointed First Lesson for today, II Kings 5.1-14. Yes, it's a story I know well, and most of us do if we remember anything at all about the whole business of the Elijah and Elisha, prophets to the kings of Israel ... and that little piece about Jezebel and the Prophets of Ba'al ... and the transfer of authority from Elijah to Elisha (which we heard last Sunday, as Elijah ascends to heaven in a Chariot of Fire) ... But for most of us, they are just pieces of stories. We spend most of our time *on this side of the text* in the Gospels, and sometimes in the letters of Paul (as we did last in last Sunday's sermon).

And the problem with the Lectionary, this three-year book of appointed readings which we Christian Churches mostly all follow ... the problem with the lectionary is that we have only pieces of selections from the Bible and not continuous readings thereof.

And so you need to know that in recent years in the most recent revision of the revised Lectionary, there has been provision made for what are called "Semi-continuous" readings ... which in our congregation we do follow.

And so for the last couple of Sundays the First Readings have been from the Book of Kings ... in a semi-continuous fashion.

Well, I went over the First Reading for today and then I thought, "Wait there's more to the story!" And I just happened to have a conversation with my friend Rabbi Schwab where I told him about this Reading and he said, "But the best part comes next! The dirt!" And I said, "You're right, that part is never read in the Church."

And so, having a modicum of power and authority over such things, I decided to make some changes ... and instead of having part of chapter 5 of Second Kings being read and leaving things in midair ... I decided that for today, just for today, we would omit the Second Lesson (another piece of St. Paul's missive to the Galatians) and instead have the *second* part of Chapter 5 become the Second Lesson so that we have the whole story in our midst.

And now, lest my explanation of the background of the readings become the sermon itself, let's get to the point.

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Here's the scene. The King of Israel (of what is now the Northern part of the State of Israel) and the King of Aram (mostly present day Syria and northwest Iraq) were not friends. There had been military actions against each other. Naaman (the Syrian) was the best General of the King Ben-Hadad's armies. And in one of his raids, when (as was the custom) some of the young girls were captured and taken home as slaves or servants, one of those girls became a servant to Naaman's wife.

She noticed that Naaman was suffering from *tzaraath* (Hebrew for a skin condition that is usually translated as Leprosy).

Imagine! Mighty General, bad skin, could not be in contact with others, not even his wife.

The unnamed captured slave-girl says to Naaman's wife that he could get help from the prophet in Samaria (northern part of Israel) ... this would be Elisha.

Naaman goes to Ben-Hadad, gets permission and a letter of introduction to the King of Israel, who when he reads the letter believes only that Ben-Hadad is again up to no good and that this is a trick. Elisha intervenes and Naaman shows up at Elisha's house with his chariot and horses stomping their feet.

Elisha doesn't get close to Naaman but sends a messenger to tell him to go and wash off in the Jordan and do it seven times (a holy number) and the *tzaraath* will go away.

Naaman protests in a rather humorous part of the narrative suggesting the rivers near Damascus are much cleaner than the Jordan (they are). However Naaman's servants explain that if Elisha had asked the mighty Naaman to do a big thing would he not, and what was his problem anyway!?

So he does, and he's clean and that's the end of the reading.

BUT it isn't. What follows is that Naaman believes Elisha is a prophet and that the God of Elisha is a much better God than Rimmon (his Armenian Deity) and he converts on the spot and wants to give Elisha some silver and other gifts, which Elisha refuses ... and Naaman says, "OK, but just

let me take some of your dirt back home so when I stand on it, I'll not be worshipping Rimmon, nor will the King of Aram, but we will be worshipping Adonai Elohim ... the God of Elisha."

And he does, and then there is that little part about Elisha's servant Gehazi who takes matters into his own hands, runs after Naaman, tells him that what Elisha really wanted was silver and two new three-piece suits, which Naaman gives him and when Gehazi takes it back to Naaman, and lies about it, Naaman, being a prophet knows that he is lying and says, "Naaman's *tzaraath* now belongs to you and to all your children and grandchildren!" And Gehazi leaves the service of Elisha, having now become a leper.

Whew! I love Biblical stories.

When I was thinking about the dirt I recalled the time when we in Germany, in Eisenach (Luther territory!) and visiting the castle Wartburg (where as you know Luther hid out for a while when he was under papal edict ... and translated the New Testament from the Greek into readable German so everyone could have a shot at understanding the story of Jesus).

In the Great Hall of that Castle is a long tapestry depicting the legend of how the Wartburg came to be in 1067 CE.

The story goes that the count of Schauenburg, Ludwig der Springer (also known as Ludwig the Jumper) was the man. According to tradition, the castle got its name when its founder first laid eyes on the hill upon which the Wartburg now sits; enchanted by the site, he is supposed to have exclaimed, "Warte, Berg -- du sollst mir eine Burg werden!" ("Wait, mountain -- you shall become a castle for me!"). It is a German play on words for mountain (Berg) and fortress (Burg). In addition, Ludwig der Springer is said to have had clay from his lands transported to the top of the hill, which was not quite within his lands, so he might swear that the castle was built on his ground.

He was most famous for this piece of trickery, he would take dirt from land he did own, spread it around on land he wanted, then *jump* on it and declare that this was in fact his property ... and he took it over. And that's why we have the Wartburg Castle which of course saved Luther's life.

Dirt. Reminded me of the bag of soil I have in my dresser at home ... soil from the farm where I grew up in Pennsylvania. I guess I could go outside in the back yard, pour it onto the ground and then declare in a loud voice that 127 Mateo Circle North is actually Pennsylvania property ... but of course no one would believe me. ☺

And all of this brings up a question ... it has to do with what we carry with us.

Naaman carries dirt with him so he can worship his new God in a place where he believes that God does yet live; Ludwig carries dirt with him so he can claim things that are not his and make them his own ... but what about us?

Some of us carry Rosary Beads in our pockets ...

Stones ... some of us carried stones this past Lenten Season ...

Some people have carried water back from the Jordan River and poured it into the Baptismal Font so that when I do a baptism the water is commingled ...

Few of you know that there is a parcel of soil from Israel poured into the middle of our Church Labyrinth ...

Yes these are some of the inanimate things we carry, but what about the other things, the things of the head and soul and heart ...?

What do we carry into worship?

“The things we have done, and the things we have left undone ...”

The words we said and the words we should not have said ...

Sorrows

Guilt

Shame

Grief (much of that happened yesterday at the Memorial Service for Darolyn) ...

But also joy, hope, promise ...

What happens is that we come here together with the things we carry ... it can be no other way ... and we place them, if you will, at the “Throne of Grace” and what happens is that the Holy One takes all these things and makes them holy, sanctified, forgiven, understood ... and with the things we carry, makes us holy, sanctified, forgiven, understood as well.

And there’s one more thing ...

It is not only what we carry with us here, but what we carry with us when we leave ...

Greeting of Peace, so that we become makers of peace in the world ...

We say the bread is the body of Christ, and so we take with us that body, we become that body, as we go into the world, outside the door ...

The Water of our Baptism so that we can remember who we are and whose we are and how precious a gift it is to belong, and then make *belonging* one of the watchwords of society ...

In the end, it is all a gift ... what we bring with us and what we take with us ... for the healing of the world, the building up of our brothers and sisters, and spreading of the good news ...

Let us pray.

Into your hands, almighty God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you, for we are yours. Into your hands, incarnate Savior, we place ourselves: receive us and draw us after you, that we may follow your steps; abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling. Into your hands, O hovering Spirit, we place ourselves: take us and fashion us after your image; let your comfort strengthen, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us, soul and body, in life and in death, in this world of shadows and in your changeless world of light eternal, now and forever. **Amen.**

*Deo Gratias (+)*  
*The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III*  
*Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church*  
*Santa Fe, NM*