

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

2 Kings 5:1-15a

As part of my class at CMU, we read a work by the Roman Emperor Julian, often called, “the Apostate.” Julian had been raised in the church. In fact, he had been trained to be a lector, that is, one who did the readings in the service, a position that was a step toward becoming a pastor at some point. Along the way, however, especially on account of political intrigue, his life took some turns, and in the process he plunged back into the paganism of the Roman past, which was still a religious force at the time. In fact, he was so embittered against the church, blaming it for Rome’s decline in the world, that he wrote very pointed attacks against it. In his work, “Against the Gallilaeans,” he makes the argument that Christianity is a fraud because why would the true God want to be associated with such a no-name nation as Israel, which couldn’t boast of any kings as great as those of Egypt, Rome, or Greece, or any comparably great philosophers or physicians or statesman. Why would the *only* true God—and Julian thought that an arrogant claim on the part of the Christians, that they had the *only* true God—reveal Himself to the Jews out of all the people in the earth.

Today we see that, while God did primarily reveal Himself to the Jews in the Old Testament, He was not only the God of the Jews, but as the only true God, was, as He still is, the God of all. The gentile, Naaman the Syrian, comes to Israel for healing and leaves not only cleansed but indeed an Old Testament Christian, brought to faith through the ministry of the prophet Elisha. And Naaman was hardly the only gentile to have this experience in the Old Testament.

But Julian still has a good point, doesn’t he? What were the Jews? What was Israel? David was a great king, but he was no Caesar. Israel’s borders at times grew, but never so large as Rome’s. Solomon was wise, but his people can boast of no Plato, Pythagoras, Cicero, or Hippocrates. Surely the gospel would have packed more power if it had come out of Athens or Rome, wouldn’t it?

And that wasn’t all. The Gallilaeans, that is, the Christians, worshipped a crucified God, a weak God. Criminals were crucified. Slaves were crucified. Barbarians were crucified. The Christian’s God wasn’t even qualified to be a Roman citizen. How could He possibly be divine? The Roman gods had given Rome victory. The Christian God’s biggest moment to a Roman looked like utter humiliation and defeat. And look at it. Consider the crucifix. Isn’t that what it looks like?

How did Naaman find out about the prophet in Israel? From a slave girl. How had he gotten her as a servant for his wife? The Syrians had taken her captive in one of their many successful raids on the weaker Israel. Naaman wasn’t pointed to the man of God by a king or another general, by a philosopher or statesman, or even by a physician. No, he was pointed to the Lord by a lowly handmaid, even as we are given our Lord by one. He received the testimony of a subservient girl from a subservient nation. And that, my friends, is the way of the gospel. St. Paul pulls no punches but directly confronts that truth, so troublesome to both the Jews and the gentiles of his time (1 Corinthians 1:18-25):

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

To Naaman’s credit, he was not too proud to go to Israel for healing. In fact, we see this great warrior waiting at the prophet’s door with his retinue, unable to enter Elisha’s house because as an uncircumcised pagan he would have made it unclean according to Old Testament law. We see this rich general, in spite of all the gifts he’d brought, standing like a beggar at the door of the poor prophet. Naaman wasn’t too proud to humble himself this far.

Yet Naaman was proud, as we all are. He did have his breaking point, when enough was enough. As he waited and expected some grand show, some impressive feat, some well-orchestrated act from the man of God, what was he told, not even by the man of God, but by his servant? ***“Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.”***

Naaman got what he wanted, a recipe for the restoration of his leprous flesh, but it wasn't enough, or rather, it was too much. Naaman had a certain way he expected God and His Church to operate:

But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage.

And Naaman was right. The Jordan was nothing compared to those rivers. It didn't carry commerce like them, or like the Mississippi. All it was good for was a sight for soar eyes and apparently the cleansing of leprosy. And there was the rub. He'd come all this way to get clean, and the prophet wanted him to dip seven times in the muddy waters of a second-rate river, a dirty stream. Makes sense, right?

Thank God we're never like Julian. Thank God we're never like Naaman. Thank God we never think we twenty-first century Americans are better than the ancients believers of the Old and New Testaments. Thank God we never consider ourselves more evolved, more advanced, more sophisticated than God and His Church. Thank God we never expect God to cater to our whims, to condescend to our notions, to remake Himself in our image. Thank God we're never offended by a God of crosses, never offended by the notion that faith might actually mean sacrifice at times, that God's Word might at times have to triumph when confronting our stubborn wills and selfish desires. Thank God we never approach God from the perspective of what we want and expect from Him before first considering what He says He wants and expects of us, and more than that, what we should want and expect from Him if we are indeed children of God and not only of the flesh. Thank God we're not like Naaman. Did the trustees build that sarcasm sign to flash when I'm being sarcastic yet? If not, we're hopefully all getting the point.

Thankfully, there was someone to talk some sense into Naaman, as pastors and fellow Christians are bidden to do for us in our own day and lives.

But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

If you don't like what God has to say, the problem is not with God, but with you. If you don't like how God operates, the problem is not with God, but with you. God is not withholding His blessings. No, you are rejecting them. God is not turning His back on you. No, you're turning your back on Him. That was what Naaman needed to be reminded. That is what we need to be reminded as well.

Rather than being troubled when God comes through humble nations and men, in plain words, with simple water, bread, and wine, we ought to rejoice all the more. He is that much more accessible. We can be that much more reassured that we are not beneath Him. He bend downs to us who could never, even as Romans or Americans, reach up to Him. That is the gospel truth, and if you want to be clean, if you want your sins washed away, if you want a place in heaven, if you want God's ear, you must find a place in His arms, open for you or anyone else nowhere else but on and through the cross, where for all the appearance of defeat He won His greatest victory, not for Himself, but for us.

Naaman says it Himself. There ***is no God but the God of Israel.*** We need to come to terms with that. Like it or not, this is God, and so we do well to have and keep Him as our God. He doesn't put on a show. And He doesn't mince His words. At the same time, He doesn't withhold from us cleansing. He washed Naaman in the same muddy river, less impressive than those of Damascus, in which His Son would be baptized. He will not withhold His grace from you either, even if it's found the last place you would have expected it, in a book, a font, or a pastor's hands at the rail. Even if it must be like Naaman, if we have our moments of kicking and screaming and need some sense talked into us once in a while, may God bring us to that realization and keep us in it. Amen.