

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

2 Kings 5:1-14

Muddy Water, Clear Promise

Naaman really had it all: a big army, a powerful position, a good family, the respect and admiration of his countrymen, a trophy case bigger than some people's garages, a loving wife, a slew of servants, and, oh yeah, leprosy. Leprosy kind of sours the list, I guess, doesn't it? What good are all these blessings when your skin stinks with decay and your fingers are getting ready to fall off?

Fortunately for Naaman, there was someone with better connections than he in his house. There was a little girl, perhaps not much older than some of our grade-schoolers here today, captured in conquest and now belonging to Naaman, who, although she could have wished her master the worst, shared good news with Naaman's wife: *"If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."* And in a bold stroke of faith, without any more details being given, we next see Naaman before his master, moved by the faith of this Israelite child to ask permission to go and be healed. And with his master's blessing, a busload of bribery, and a letter from the king, Naaman was off to see the prophet. But this was no jaunt to Midland that Naaman was on. This was a long and dangerous trip into enemy land to ask a hostile king to procure his healing, which would be no small feat, since Naaman was a commander in an army that had already made incursions into Israelite territories and carried off Israelite people and property.

But, in spite of the obstacles, Naaman and his people set off, and we soon find them at the prophet's house, standing at the parsonage door, expecting a show. But the Spirit tends to shy away from spectacles, and Elisha sent out his servant. Here was this mighty man of valor from Syria with gifts and gusto, and he only gets the prophet's servant? Did Elisha know how far he had traveled? Did Elisha know he had come merely through faith in the words of a humble servant girl? Did Elisha know the hoops he had jumped through to make this day happen? Did Elisha know who he was? Yup. But God gives gifts and not wages, and God is a promise-giver, not a show-promoter. Naaman would have his healing, but not his spectacle. The messenger said, *"Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."*

That was the last straw. Naaman had the faith of many a modern-day mega-church protestant, and, having stepped out in faith as the Christian hip are wont to say, he expected to be wowed. He says as much. *"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."* But the prophet offered him only a measly messenger and muddy waters—no grand show, no fireworks, no stage, not even a tambourine or a Power Point. Nope, a measly messenger and muddy waters were to be enough to accompany God's promise.

God's gifts are not bought, they are freely offered, and God's promise is to be carried and proclaimed, not dressed and swallowed up in distracting spectacle. God's gifts and God's promise are not the sideshow, they are the whole shebang, disappointing as that may be to our sinful flesh, which, ever since creation, has wanted to be wooed. No, Satan woos and works the spectacular. God is often anything but spectacular, keeping and conveying His promises in everyday events and by ordinary objects. Remember, this is the God who adopted an insignificant and stiff-necked nation, who spoke to Elijah, not in the wind, the earthquake, or in the fire, but in the low whisper, who was born in a manger and baptized in these same muddy waters, who preached in off-the-beaten-track towns, who hung next to a thief, who, even after rising, remains unimpressive and laughable in the eyes of much of the world. Even here and now, how many Sundays doesn't He stand in the simple waters of the font, become present in simple bread and wine, and speak through a simple messenger not spectacularly enough for many of us to be wowed, not spectacularly enough for most of our fellow members us to come.

Naaman wanted to be healed, but he wanted to be healed spectacularly, and so he second-guessed God's methods: *"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?"* It would be great if on hospital calls, I could waive my hand and heal the patient. But, alas, God, in His mercy, has chosen, rather, to work through the less spectacular means of doctors and medicine to work healing when healing is His will. It may be annoying for me to have to carry my inhaler everywhere, but it is a gift of God without which I wouldn't have enough breath to preach for another half-hour. How disappointed you would be then!

Naaman's servant girl spoke the wisdom that brought him to the prophet, and now Naaman's servants speak the wisdom that brings him to obey the prophet's word. There are two ways of translating this verse. The first is: *"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!'"* This is a good translation, and it makes a good point. Naaman would have traveled across the world to carry out the prophet's directions if they had been impressive enough, so why shouldn't he obey all the more when they were so simple. How many wouldn't gladly eat mud off the bottom of the Tittabawassee if God promised healing? How much more willingly shouldn't Naaman have splashed like a toddler in a puddle in the muddy waters of the Jordan, in which our Lord Himself was later baptized to fulfill all righteousness?

But the other possible translation is insightful as well: *"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?'"* This too is a good and valid translation, and it also makes a great point. While Naaman's thought the prophet's instructions simple, the prophet's words were surely great, for they promised cleansing. The promise was what was important and worthy of amazement, and Naaman had missed it because he focused on the trappings that surrounded it. Naaman had come to be healed, and now the prophet had spoken a great word, promising healing. Why shouldn't Naaman dive into the Jordan with glee?

Naaman's healing was amazing, and it was a real healing, not just some fairy tale, and we ought rightly to marvel at it, but let us also remember the greater healing that our Lord has promised us: healing from sin and death in the resurrection where our skin will be restored never to sag, wrinkle, or decay again. So bathe in your simple waters as well, eat and drink your simple bread and wine, read the simple pages of your simple book, and listen to your simple messenger. Just don't dare call these things anything less than spectacular. No, they may not be wrapped up and swallowed in spectacular distractions, but they bear God's promise, which made even the muddy waters of the Jordan clear with mercy and grace.

And as you live out your Christian life, remember that, just as God wraps the most spectacular gifts in the simplest of packages, so also our greatest gifts to Him are what often seems most simple and mundane. Restraining our temper, checking our tongue, listening to a lonely friend, keeping our eyes on our own paper during a test, punching the clock for well-worked hours at our job, mixing a meal for the family dinner, helping an elderly neighbor with her chores, all these things and similar things may not catch the eye of the world, but they fill the eyes of our loving God with the greatest joy, because they bear our love for Him and for our neighbor, because, without these little things, the seemingly great things would never be possible.

The Christian religion is a preeminently great religion precisely because it is so simple and mundane, so rooted in the everyday and so necessary for everyone, great and small alike. Naaman almost lost what he needed in what he wanted, trading the simple necessity for spectacular frivolity. He almost lost healing because he wanted a show. Remember what you need: God's grace and blessing. And remember where you find it: in His simple Word and Sacraments. Don't let anyone wrap that up and swallow it in spectacle and distraction. No, receive those simple things with spectacular wonderment, and reflect such spectacular amazement in the most simple things of life. Amen.