

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**C: 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 28/ Proper 23**  
**2 Kings 5:1-15c (Luke 17:11-19)**

**9 October 2022**  
**Salem, Bridgeport**

**“The Unexpected Way to Healing”**

So here we have Naaman, a mighty warrior, a great commander who has won many victories for his king. Naaman has everything he could want – power & privilege & wealth & access to even more of those things – because he has access to the most powerful person in the country – the king. There is only one thing that Naaman does not have and that is his health. Instead, Naaman has an incurable disease – leprosy.

Leprosy is a disease caused by a bacterium that causes numbness in the skin and particularly in the extremities, and the danger of numbness is that you’re not always aware when that numb part has been injured.

So if you had leprosy and were poor and lived in unhygienic conditions, rats could nibble off your finger or your nose while you slept and you wouldn’t even notice.

So there was the numbness, and the risk of unnoticed injury, and then as the disease progressed the numbness would turn into paralysis.

Back in Biblical times there was no cure for leprosy, so once you had it, it would eventually kill you. And it wasn’t just the physical suffering.

Because leprosy, like the coronavirus, is a respiratory disease, spread through the air, anyone without a LOT of power or privilege or wealth who contracted it were forced to live in colonies outside the city limits, required to ring a bell and shout “Unclean!” if anyone approached, and to maintain a 16’ distance from any clean person.

After our experience with the Covid-19 pandemic,

I think we have a far deeper understanding of what it must have been like for such people.

All we have to do is to imagine what our lives would be like today if there were no vaccines and no medicines for Covid.

We would still be living as lepers in our pods, isolated from family and friends, with people still getting sick and dying at alarming rate, and all of us at risk.

Now Naaman is better off than most people that suffered from leprosy because he happened to be a person who had immense power and privilege.

In other words he lived in a house that was clean and sanitary and could be kept free from finger or nose eating rats.

Even when he was on a military campaign he had a commodious tent, all the provisions he need, and servants who could check his body at the end of each day and make sure any wounds that he had not noticed were cared for so that they didn’t become infected.

He even had servants who could watch over him while he slept to keep any hungry rat away.

But while Naaman had it better than most, he understood that the disease he had would continue to progress, and soon the numbness would become paralysis, and eventually it would kill him.

And even though his power & privilege were able to protect him from many of the consequences of his illness, he could never entirely forget the time bomb within.

Now remember that Naaman commanded an army which had conquered another people killed many, and taken the rest as slaves.

One of those slaves was a young girl who worked as his wife’s personal servant.

Now think about that servant girl for a moment.

Likely many of her family and friends had been killed by this man's army.

She had been taken away from her family her friends, her home, her country, her entire life.

Her freedom had been stolen from her and she had been made a slave.

She could have watched Naaman and prayed that the illness could get him quickly.

She certainly didn't have to offer help. And yet she did.

Instead of simply seeing Naaman as the enemy or as the oppressor she saw Neiman as a fellow human being who was suffering from a disease and who needed to be cured or he would die.

She may have also realized that the disease was contagious and as long as Naaman had it,

his wife and everyone in his household and everyone with whom he came into contact were at risk.

And so she offers him a lifeline.

She tells her mistress that there is a prophet who can heal Naaman's leprosy, and his wife tells Naaman.

And here we realize how desperate Naaman is.

He has no reason to trust the woman he has taken into captivity.

What could she know? And why would she care?

He knows he can't follow up on this without letting his king know,

but taking the word of a captive servant girl to the king

took a lot of courage, a lot of desperation, or a lot of both.

When Naaman tells the king, the king who appreciates and cares for Naaman says,

"Of course I will send you to the king of Israel to be cured!"

No notice that the serving girl didn't say go to the king but to the prophet.

But Naaman and his king are making assumptions based on their world.

Such a cure would be almost priceless,

and so the king sends great riches to the king who he assumes has the power to heal.

Now when the king of Israel receives his visitor and his entourage and all of the gifts,

and reads the letter from the King of Aram, he has no idea what's going on

because no one has mentioned the prophet.

All the king knows is that another king who has just conquered another country

and who could very easily conquer his, is asking him to do something that he has no idea how to do.

To him it seems like a trap, a set up, a ploy to start a war.

And so the king tears his garments, he wails in lament, and he's at a loss as to what to do.

The prophet hears of his king's distress and says, "No problem. Just send him to me."

And so the king sends Naaman and his company to Elijah.

And when they reach Elijah's place and are ready to hand over valuables to him,

they call for the prophet who has been notified by the king, and the prophet does it even deign to come out!

Naaman highly offended! This is not how things are done!

He is Naaman, the powerful mighty warrior and he has been sent not just by his king,

but by the king of Israel and the prophet doesn't even deign to see him!

The prophet simply sends out a servant with a message to go and bathe in the Jordan River 7 times.

Now he's not only offended, but irate! How dare he! This whole trip has been nothing but a fiasco.

He should never have listened to that girl. He should never have gotten his hopes up.

This is just a wild goose chase at best, and at worst it's all designed to make him look foolish.

His servants will be laughing, his soldiers will be laughing, his king will be angry,

the prophet will be laughing, everybody in Israel will be laughing!

He will not do this humiliating, embarrassing, shameful thing. He will not!

But his servants, his slaves, these people that he owned, whose lives he controlled,

who had every reason to hate him and wish the worst on him,

instead encourage him, just like his wife's servant girl.

They say, "What's the harm? If the prophet had asked you to do some great thing would you not have done it?"

Of course you would. So why not do this little thing?"

And again Naaman is desperate enough that he actually listens.

He bathes in this little dinky dirty Jordan River and he is made clean.

Now the reason I've spent so much time looking at this story  
is because it's not just a story about some man long ago.  
This story is about you and me, because we all suffer from a disease that is kind of like leprosy. It's called sin.  
For sin does the same thing as leprosy in that it causes parts of us to become numb,  
to become desensitized to the things that can cause us and others harm.  
We are all affected by sin, but just as with leprosy it affects people different ways.  
Some end up living in a kind of leper colony,  
places that are called by various names like ghettos, or the inner city, or bad neighborhoods. And so all of the things  
that sin causes – like gun violence or food insecurity or poor education or lack of healthcare  
are like the bites of rats that cause injury and harm.  
While the sin that causes those things affect all of us, some of us have enough power and privilege like Naaman  
that we can get on with our lives without experiencing great injury.  
And yet the disease continues to destroy our lives in ways that we are not even aware of.  
The disease is progressive, causing us to be desensitized to the pain and hurt and need all around us  
and for the most part we can pretend that we're not sick.  
And yet as long as we are infected by sin we are contagious and the epidemic continues.  
Now God does offer healing for our sin sick souls, and this story tells us exactly where to find that healing.  
The answer is found in the story but I have also discovered it in my own life.  
4 1/2 years ago I had everything I could ever want in life –  
a healthy body, a husband, children, friends, a beautiful house, a good job, a car, healthcare.  
I had everything and yet I was suffering from a depression  
that no prescription could prevent and no talk therapy could touch.  
Depression is like leprosy of the heart and soul because it makes you feel numb.  
And as it progresses the numbness turns into paralysis,  
and so there were days when I could barely manage to get myself out of bed.  
I had tried everything I could think of and nothing was working  
and then I remembered that 40 years before when I had been similarly depressed  
a student in my clinical pastoral education cohort asked if he could pray for me in tongues.  
I didn't see how I could say no so I said yes and he prayed for me in words I didn't understand  
and the next day I was fine.

That memory returned and with it came a sudden thought:  
I knew a Pentecostal pastor, Bishop Eron Simmonds, who maybe could do the same thing!  
His congregation had been in our church building for two years but I had no real connection with him.  
If I was invited to one of their annual events I would go.  
But they were obviously black & Jamaican & Pentecostal & I confess that I assumed they were poor & uneducated.  
In other words they were from a world completely alien to mine.

But I was desperate so I called Pastor Simmonds and I asked if he would mind praying for me in tongues.  
He said he'd be happy to meet with me. So we talked and he did pray for me, but not in tongues.  
And he invited me to his church.  
And when I went the next Sunday,  
I found myself listening spellbound to the best preacher I'd ever heard, for an hour!  
In his sermon he talked about all of the things that he didn't have in his life,  
and all of the challenges that he was facing, and yet, he simply radiated joy!  
Afterwards I told him I wanted that joy and he said well I can tell you how to get it.  
You just have to be willing to let go of everything else in your life and submit 100% to God,  
things like ideas and beliefs that I had always thought were right,  
things like power and privilege and authority and caring about what others thought of me.  
I argued with him for six months.  
But finally in desperation I gave up all of my firmly held beliefs  
and I submitted to God regardless of what anyone else would think.  
I was no more sure that it would work Naaman was sure when he went into that Jordan River. But I submitted to God and  
I was healed.  
And over the last 4 years I have come to know a God who has so much power & so much love  
that I can't even describe it!  
And along with the healing, I found purpose and meaning and joy.

What the story of Naaman's healing tells us is that the place where we are apt to find healing  
is in a place where we don't usually go, from people who are not like us.  
When we listen to those who live in today's leper colonies, in ghettos or bad neighborhoods  
and we get to know them and they get to know us,  
we will find that God will use them to speak to us and lead us to healing.  
That only comes when we let go of our own power and privilege and pride and self-sufficiency  
and when we let go of the way we have always done things,  
and the things we have always assumed to be right,  
and we say, "God, we will do anything you ask."  
And then when God asks us do something that is out of our comfort zone  
or something that seems beneath us or foolish or potentially embarrassing or risky,  
we need to do it, because that's the only way that God can heal us.

God changed my life 4 years ago and I don't regret it for a single minute.  
The joy that I know right now has nothing to do with the things that I have.  
but with the God I now know and love and serve.  
I spent my whole life in the church, and my whole career as a pastor,  
but it was only through someone whom I first saw  
in probably much the same way that Naaman saw those servants,  
that I was led to healing.

Now maybe you don't suffer from depression or from anxiety  
and maybe your life is good and maybe you don't think you need any more joy in your life,  
but let me tell you that while I experienced healing from depression,  
the joy I have found is something else entirely.  
It's like when a person develops cataracts and it's such a gradual process  
they don't even realize what's happening  
And then after they've had cataract surgery and their clouded lens has been replaced with a clear one, their  
world becomes so incredibly bright that they are completely amazed.  
because they didn't realize how dark their world had become.  
So whether you are suffering from something and need healing or whether you are OK,  
I want to say that unless you're telling everybody about how bright your world is,  
there's a good chance you may have cataracts on your soul,  
which God would love to heal.

Today we heard the story of Naaman  
who was healed from numbness and paralysis in his body.  
And you heard my story – how I was healed from a numbness and paralysis in my soul.  
But God's word is not just about a man in the Bible, nor is it just about me,  
but God's word is about all of us who suffer from the leprous disease called sin  
that affects all of us and our world.  
There is healing. But we will find it through those who are different from us,  
and we will find it only when we are willing to lay aside our idols,  
and our power and privilege and pride and submit to God.  
And when we do that, we will find not only healing, but faith and love and joy. Amen