

## 2 Kings 5:1-14

A few seasons ago the Wheel of Fortune game show on TV added a \$1,000,000 space to the wheel. After a lady contestant won that million-dollar prize, Pat Sajack explained how she had beaten incredible odds to do it. She had to land on the million-dollar space, he said, guess that puzzle correctly, be the top winner on the show without ever hitting a bankrupt, land on the million-dollar space on the bonus wheel, and correctly guess the bonus puzzle. Were bookies to place odds on that prize being won, I suppose they would place it at more than a million-to-one shot. Had there been bookies around in the days of Naaman, the odds of him beating his leprosy would have been even greater. His disease had a mortality rate of 100%. It was incurable. No life insurance company would have ever sold him a policy. But luck was with Naaman. He beat the odds. He licked his leprosy. Or did he? To the casual observer, when Naaman came back from the country of Samaria it would have looked like Naaman was able to pull it off and defeat his disease. But anyone who would have listened to his story would have come to a different conclusion.

Today his story is laid out for us, and as we look at it, a few things become clear. Luck had nothing to do with it, and neither did Naaman. It was God who cured Naaman in spite of many obstacles--the biggest of which was Naaman himself. And God worked to bring about this cure through the lives of many people while He Himself remained hidden through it all.

Naaman's story should interest you because yours is very much like it. Your place in God's family, your life in Christ, the miracle of your Baptism, your faith, even your being here today has nothing to do with luck...even though the odds are incredible if you count all the people in this world and note how very few of them are faithful Christians. Despite all the obstacles in your life--and just like Naaman, you and I are our biggest obstacles--God has been working, yet in a hidden way, through the lives of many people so that, like Naaman, you too would receive His life-giving cure for the leprosy of your sin.

Naaman's story begins with a little girl; a girl who was abducted from her family and taken to the land of Syria--a strange land where she was forced to serve as a slave in the house of Naaman. Did she cry day and night? Did she complain that her rights were violated? Did she plan to seek revenge against her abductors? She was Christ to her enemies. He loved Naaman by telling her mistress about a prophet in Samaria who could heal his dreaded leprosy. What are the odds that such a girl would be placed into the home of Naaman the leper? The odds are impossible. It was God who was working on Naaman's behalf.

When Naaman arrived at the palace of the King of Israel, the story should have come to an end. He knew nothing about such a cure for leprosy. And he was agitated...angry, believing Naaman was only there to cause trouble for him. But because the king raised such a ruckus, word spread and reached the ears of the prophet Elisha. And Elisha sent for Naaman to come to his house. Again, the odds of all this taking place...impossible. It was God at work.

When Naaman arrived, Elisha did not go out to meet him. He told his servant, his messenger what to say, and his servant did as he was told. But Naaman became angry at the message. 'Wash seven times in the Jordan River? I have rivers back home that are much better than this unimpressive Jordan!' And he left with anger in his heart. But Naaman's servants pleaded. 'It is a simple thing,' they said, 'Why not wash and be clean?' Their begging and pleading prevailed. Naaman went to the Jordan, washed seven times, and his leprosy was cured.

Through a girl Naaman had wronged, through a king who was his enemy, through a prophet who sent word by his messenger, and through servants who had more wisdom than Naaman God worked to heal the leper. And are not such people also in your life? Certainly God works through Christian parents. He works through those who love Him and are faithful to Him. Yet aren't there also, like with Naaman, those people that God places into our life and our story would be incomplete without them?

Someone we have wronged, whom we have hurt; someone, like the little slave girl, who did not retaliate when we did them wrong; who returned love for hate; who was a witness to the love of Jesus, a witness we needed at that time in our life?

The king of Israel had no love for Naaman, yet look how God used him to help Naaman. And so with us. God may, at times, use our enemies to bring us closer to Him. When your coworker makes fun of your Christian faith, does not this drive you into the Scriptures to find support for what you believe? When a classmate says he is proud to be an atheist, doesn't that send you to your pastor asking, "How do I respond to him?" Throughout the history of the church whenever false teachings threatened the truth of Christ, God's people were driven to study the Word and to carefully define the Faith in the church's creeds saying, "This we believe. Upon this truth we stand!"

Naaman never saw Elisha, and yet he received Elisha's message. And so all your life you only see the messenger. You never see the Lord hidden behind the message, but you do hear His messenger. One such messenger stands before you today. It's not my word, not my truth. As Elisha sent his servant, so Jesus sends His servants today to speak only what He Himself commands. You have leprosy. The mortality rate is 100%. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Not one shall escape. But there is a cure for you. The healing is in the word I speak to you because that word is the word of Christ. He forgives your sins through my word. He heals your leprosy because He took the leprosy of your sin to the cross and died there for you. He is in the water of Baptism for you as He was in the water of the Jordan for Naaman. He is in bread and wine for you to eat and drink.

But like Naaman, we are our biggest obstacle in life. We hear God's message but we do not always listen very well, or we do not act upon what we hear. We think, "he cannot be speaking to me; I don't need help. I don't need to be lectured to." And so often we turn away from the words of the messenger. Like Naaman, we may even turn away with anger in our heart. The simple truth of the Gospel is offensive to our human nature just as the simple command to wash in the Jordan was offensive to Naaman. He wanted some great work to do; some great display of God's power. And we also want some great work that we can do. Simple faith is an offense to our sinful flesh.

In spite of Naaman, God refused to give up on him. Through Naaman's servants God spoke to bring him to the healing waters. And this is how God works for us. He saves us in spite of ourselves. The church Elders act like Naaman's servants, as do other members of the congregation, pleading with lost souls--even with those who leave the church in anger like Naaman did--to repent and believe the message of life and healing. Some of you, maybe even all of us, are here today, are faithful members of the church because one of Naaman's servants came after you and pleaded with you to return.

Naaman did not make it to the healing waters on his own. On his own he would have perished. And so will we. That's why God puts different people into your life--some who are friends, some who are loved ones, some you don't like very much. Could Naaman have guessed which people in his life God was using to help him? Neither can we. And God places us into a congregation where we worship together, confess our sins together, confess the Faith together, and together receive our Lord's body

and blood. God gives you a messenger here, and whether you like him or not, his task is to proclaim exactly what God says. Only by believing the words of God (spoken by Elisha) would Naaman be saved. And also for us.

Today you are here at the Jordan. Those waters are washing over you again and again as Jesus speaks His words to you. Today Jesus is here forgiving your sins. He is here removing your leprosy. He is here for you. And throughout your life God will keep bringing you back here where His healing waters flow, where His words give life and salvation. When this journey is over and you see Naaman in heaven--for he may well be there as one who then began to worship the true God--you can compare your story with his. And both of you will readily say, "It wasn't luck that brought us here. It wasn't what we did. It was by grace." Amen.