

It is very appropriate, within the providence of God, that Dr. Mazen Alsaqa is our guest today, since in today's Old Testament scripture, and sermon, like it or not, we are all invited to wade into the world of middle eastern, international politics involving tensions between Syria and Israel and to be challenged by a remarkable peacemaking story concerning healing, humility, and God's universal love. The story of Naaman is, according to one commentator, "a delightfully pesky story" and I would agree with them fully! This is border-crossing story within which Yahweh deliberately works in some very mysterious ways to open the participants and all of us to the many possibilities and opportunities that come when we willingly open our lives to the activity and purpose of God.

At several levels this is an unwelcome story for anyone, ancient or modern, who, for their own reasons, wants God to observe humanity's borders and boundaries or to limit God as favoring one people or one nation, against all the rest of creation. For those, however, who find themselves at the margins, on the outside, this is a very welcome story indeed. It is good that we find it in Israel's scriptures and even better that it was directly quoted by Jesus in His very first recorded sermon in Nazareth, part of the reason why Jesus was expelled him from his hometown, by his own folk.

So let the spotlight fall on the various characters as they appear onstage, in God's drama of deliverance, of wholeness and healing for the outsider, a drama that pledges and promises deliverance, that opens all of us to the opportunity and possibility of experiencing God's wholeness and healing! God's wholeness and healing for all! Peace and Shalom and Salaam! For Nineveh and Jerusalem and Ramallah; for Damascus and Cairo and Mosul! For Abram and Abraham; Jacob and Israel; Isaac and Ishmael; Ruth and Deborah; Herod and Pilate; Saul and Paul! For you and me!

1. Naaman is a great man with a fearful reputation, as Field Marshall of the army of Aram he has won many a battle, though the text indicates that he did so because "Yahweh had given victory to Aram." Yes sir! The God of Israel has been an active ally in the military triumphs of Syria, over and against the people of the covenant!

Naaman's victories have in fact saved his king - the verb "victory" is from the root of the verb "to save". He is in the best possible situation. He commands troops and also the loyalty of his superior, the king. He is really at the top of his game. There is only one problem, which the narrator drops in skillfully at the end. He suffers from a skin condition. Along with his exalted status, his skill as a warrior, he is not healthy.

Without a doubt, Naaman had access to what some today call a "Cadillac" health plan, he was patient #2 in the best boutique Doctor's practice in town, ranked as such by JD Power and Associates - his King was

Patient #1. He had full and free access to consult the best Aramaean doctors at his whim, no premium to be paid, no copay, no deductible. All the resources of the Royal Hospital were at his beck and call, but, nothing could be done for him for the visible need that really mattered to Naaman!

To Naaman's credit, while a political insider, he was also very alert to sources of information outside of "official" channels, the link to the next character in the story..

2. A little Israelite girl. She has been captured by the Arameans in one of their military raids, a passing detail making concrete the victory God gave to Aram over Israel! Nameless, her role is pivotal, she is a servant to Naaman's wife. Her lowly status is emphasized by the way she is described in the text: she is a young girl, a na'arah, but this word is itself modified by the adjective, "little" (qatanah). "Thus she is a 'little little girl.'" Concerned for Naaman's health, she tells his wife about a "prophet in Samaria" who has the ability to heal Naaman's skin condition. The grace of her goodness is surely divinely inspired: "If only my lord [that is Naaman, Naaman who defeated my people, and took me into captivity!, if only Naaman..] were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

This wee wee girl, breaks out of the silence of slavery, and in so doing begins Naaman's healing. A displaced outsider, she directs Naaman to the healing power of the Lord, she is the initiator of hope and upon her word Naaman approaches his king with a request to follow this lead toward his own healing. And as quickly as she enters the story, she fades into the background...Even as Naaman runs to the Palace!

3. Kings – doing what Kings do, and what leaders and Presidents do so often... games and power, power and games.

The action moves rapidly. Naaman goes directly to his king, he doesn't need an appointment; he tells the King what the servant girl has told him. Instantly, the King of Aram gives Naaman permission to go to Israel. No lengthy bureaucratic wrangling. No Cabinet or Caucus meetings to decide whether or not to dispatch Naaman. No hearings on the hill, no focus groups, no government shutdown.

The King, needing to demonstrate his worth, insists on sending along with Naaman some lavish gifts: ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing. A lot of loot, some of it returning home, having been captured in the successful raids on Israel! And the Aramean king, as kings do, needs to send a letter to the Israelite king, asking, urging, commanding, the king of Israel to heal Naaman!

The king of Israel wonders immediately what kind of letter he is receiving from his enemy in Aram. He convinces himself before he has even read the letter that the king of Aram is picking a fight with him, for

he was well aware that he, even though he was King of Israel, had no saving power and could not "heal" Naaman.

The Israelite King quickly digs a hole for himself because he makes it all about himself, his power, standing, strength and ability. If the servant girl knew about such a prophet, even far away in forced exile surely the King of Israel, Elisha's King should have known about the prophet as well. In deep anguish, the King rends his clothes, muttering under his breath that the Arameans must have mistaken him for a deity with the power to give and take life, insisting that Aram is picking a fight!

4. The Prophet. The king doesn't find Elisha; Elisha just "shows up." It appears that Elisha knows more of what is happening in the king's life than the king knows about him. Elisha informs the King that he is agreeable to have him send Naaman to him.

5. Back to Naaman again. Naaman goes to see Elisha, but instead of meeting with him, Elisha sends a messenger out to him with instructions to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman arrives at Elisha's place surrounded by and sitting upon the trappings of his greatness, "his horse and his chariot". Naaman stands "at the door of the house of Elisha" but Elisha does not go out to welcome him or greet him, instead Elisha sends word via a messenger, through another unnamed, small person.

Elisha acts as he did being unwilling to act as "servant" of the great man, like all those who fawn over Naaman. For his part, Naaman won't stand for it. He assumed Elisha, if he was to heal him, would do so with a flourish, with a nod and a wink to the TV news. Faced with such Elisha's obstructionism, Naaman mouths off his ethnocentric slur asserting the superiority of the rivers of Damascus to the rivers of Israel and departs bitter, angry, mad, and sick, unwilling to perform what he views as a humiliating duty. He wanted a cure that reflected his status and dignity. He is great; he wanted another great man, Elisha, to call upon a great power, God, in a great way, with lots of waving things around; smoke and song.

6. More servants - Naaman's own servants now intercede to prevent their master from shutting out God's goodness, from getting in the way of his own healing. They suggest that if the prophet had asked him to do a "big thing", he would have done it, and they gently encourage him to follow the simple instruction to wash.

And so it is in verse 14 that Naaman does "according to the word of the man of God," and the results are as Elisha predicted. Naaman's flesh is restored, and his new skin is compared to that of a little child. Naaman, the great man is healed through the intercession of the little servant girl and ends with a

complexion like a little boy.

The servant girl's message got things started back in Aram, she was only there because Yahweh had given victory to the armies of Aram over Israel. The servant of Elisha offered Naaman in simple words and actions the good news of wholeness and healing and full deliverance. Naaman's own servants convinced him to get over his indignation, his hurt pride and anger by reflecting back to Naaman his own life experience. All these servants, these "little, small, wee, and weak people" are instruments of salvation, conduits of God's wholeness and healing for Naaman and for any of us who want to make things hard or difficult for ourselves or for God.

Naaman's story, Naaman's healing is a real Masterpiece Mystery. "Upstairs, Downstairs" meets "Downton Abbey" and Sherlock Holmes! There are backstairs conversations between servant and mistress; servants telling their masters what to do. Powerful people, enemy kings no less, doing one another's bidding. Naaman's injured pride overcome by his desire to be made whole; an official missive couched in diplomatic code from one king to another almost tipping the region into war and the Syrian "dissing" of the health benefits of the River Jordan. A rich story indeed...

Today we can let this story open to us all the many possibilities and opportunities that come when we accept that God disrespects the boundaries that we humans erect. None of the boundaries that we place or attempt to place around God's love, in a vain attempt to corral God's love for just some people, can and will hold God back from loving the world, in all its brokenness, desiring wholeness and healing and peace for the entire neighborhood, that is God's creation.

Today we can let this story open to us all the many possibilities and opportunities that come when we are open God's saving word no matter from whom and where it comes to us. Today we are invited to stop rushing to judgment, to refuse to be bound by ways of seeing God and life that drain life and love from us and from God's purposes. "Little people", people who are different from us, even people who disagree with us, even people whom we imagine to be disagreeable, may really be the ones who have and carry and offer God's life to us and for us.

During his first sermon at Nazareth, Jesus makes good use of the perennial tensions between Jew and gentile, us and them. Jesus exploits the essential edginess of this provocative tale. Jesus saw in this tale the fullness of God's grace for all and through all. Tragically hearing of God's wholeness and healing in Jesus' kind and open and just sermon that congregation worked itself into a rage and drove Jesus the leper from their community. Today we have to make our choice in responding to this story.

If we will allow it, this story can and will challenge us, convert us and comfort us:

Challenging us to see and trust that we are fully grasped by the extraordinary love that God is always sharing with the world, and live accordingly!

Converting us to be and become partners, cousins, neighbors, and friends with one another and all people, and live accordingly!

Comforting us with strength and purpose, with wholeness and healing, and live accordingly!

May it be so for all of us this day, and so may we discover God's wholeness and healing. Amen.