

January 22, 2023
Text: 2 Kings 5:1-15a

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Romans 1:16 – “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The word of God is in no way just words, just ideas put into print or spoken in complete sentences. There is something much greater, much more powerful, at work in the word – the power of God Himself.

And it isn't just that it tells us this in Romans. Plenty of examples exist throughout the Scriptures that show this power in action. Our Old Testament lesson this morning is one such example. Here we see several instances where the word of God overcomes obstacles and works in ways contrary to human notions, and by the end of the narrative brings a Gentile to confess that “there is no God is all the earth but in Israel.”

So we meet this Gentile, Naaman, and we're told several things about him. He's a great warrior and commander of the Syrian army – the Syrians were enemies of the Israelites. Yet Naaman is also a leper, afflicted with a skin disease that's not only unattractive but possibly even fatal as it progresses.

Now, how might such a person be evaluated from the viewpoint of one of God's people? Is he someone we should care about at all? No doubt many of the Israelites would say that his leprosy was deserved. Afflict God's people with the sword, get afflicted in return. Serves him right, we might think.

Or maybe, if we adopt a slightly more “enlightened,” “tolerant” view, we'd say he needs help, and we'd direct him to his own gods. He's a Syrian, so he should look to the gods of Syria for help. To suggest that the only God who exists is the God of Israel, and further that these Syrian gods are unable to help, would be very intolerant. It would mean telling him that his “truth” isn't actually true, which will probably offend him a lot.

Better to just let him be and hope for the best while never actually talking to him. After all, he's probably getting punished by God and deserves it all. That's what we'd figure an Israelite of the day would think.

But someone does speak, and directs this Gentile to seek the Lord. Who would do such a thing? Who would be the right person to say such things, from a worldly point of view? Maybe an evangelist, specially trained in Syrian culture and customs? Perhaps one of the sons of the prophets who had several years of theological training? Or an entire medical team deployed from Jerusalem who would apply all their knowledge to curing his leprosy, and perhaps slip in an occasional word about God?

It's none of these! That's not to say that there aren't needs for trained evangelists and theologians and medical missionary teams. They are indeed used by God to show His mercy and speak His word. But they aren't the only ones.

In this case, God uses a little girl to point Naaman to Himself. And this little girl is in fact a captured Israelite, taken from her home and family by the very people Naaman commands! Though she has every reason to hate her master, through the love put in her heart by the Holy Spirit, she says, “Would that my lord were with the prophet in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

Here, a simple little girl who has been put in a position of terrible hardship speaks God's word to those around her, the Holy Spirit in her heart causing her to do as Christ would spell out centuries later: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Okay, so this little girl speaks to her master. That's all good and well, even heartwarming, but is Naaman actually going to listen? From the perspective of worldly reason, the answer would seem to be no. Why would he?

She hasn't given any persuasive or well-reasoned arguments, or presented any evidence, for her bold claim. How does she know this will happen? And Naaman didn't get to his high position by taking advice from small children. Gullibility isn't a virtue for an army commander.

Besides, he knows that his army is the reason she's enslaved. Why would she want to help him? More than likely, she's hoping that, if Naaman goes to Samaria, he'll take her along to point out this prophet, and then she can make a break for it.

And who's to say that they Israelites are going to get an enemy general just waltz into their capitol city? Human thinking, aided by the doubts of the devil, supplies all sorts for reasons why God's word can't work, why those who would share the Gospel – the little girl, you – should just save their breath.

But what happens? Naaman, this mighty man of valor, commander of the Syrian army, actually listens to this little slave girl, believes her. He thinks there's truth in what she says, because he then goes to his lord, the king of Syria, and relays what the girl said.

Think about how ludicrous this appears. There's the king of Syria, and in comes his esteemed and successful military commander, who promptly tells him, "Hey, this little girl I captured said the prophet of the God of Israel will cure my incurable disease. I should go check this out." Surely the king would ask his commander why he's taking advice from slave girls and then maybe relieve him of his command to get his head checked out.

But again, against every human impulse and reason, God's word works. The king not only sends his general on this seemingly crazy errand, but he even writes a letter to the king of Israel, throwing his royal weight behind what the little girl had spoken.

Does the king of Syria actually believe this? Or is he just looking to pick a fight, as the king of Israel suspects? It really doesn't matter. What matters is that the call of God, spoken through a slave girl, has changed hearts and minds and opened impossibly-locked doors. Naaman, commander of the Syrian army, is headed to Samaria to seek out the prophet of Yahweh, the true God.

So Naaman arrives, bringing with him a fabulous amount of wealth to buy God's favor and pay for the longed-for miracle. He thinks along the lines of every other religion, the way all people think according to their sinful nature. God must be appeased, won over, by something we give, be that gold and silver or doing good deeds, and if we offer enough, then God is obligated to do what we want.

Yet the prophet, and God Himself, don't offer blessings that can be bought or sold or forced. God works out of love and grace, giving His gifts freely. No doubt this puzzles Naaman, or would have, if something else didn't bring him to anger first.

What brings this anger about? Naaman has come clear to Samaria, brought all these wonderful gifts, arrives at the prophet's house... and what sort of grand welcome does he get? We read, "And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying 'Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.'"

Naaman comes all this way, and Elisha won't even come out and greet him in person? Don't they know who he is? What a snub, to just send a mere messenger to speak to such a distinguished guest!

And further, what kind of silly task is this, washing in the Jordan? Shouldn't this God of Israel display His powers for Naaman in a more exciting way? And if it's rivers that will do the trick, they have those in Syria – ones like the Abana, a cold, clear mountain stream, something you'd much rather wash in than the Jordan, which is a muddy mess draining the valley into the Dead Sea. The perceived insults and foolishness being what they are, Naaman storms off in a rage.

Suddenly, it looks like everything's coming undone. All that's happened with the word first spoken through the little girl, is it all for nothing with this potential convert walking away? What should they do? What in our minds could salvage the situation?

Maybe Elisha should run after Naaman's chariot and apologize for the misunderstanding. Maybe they could reach a compromise where Naaman can wash in the river of his choosing, or that he has to wash in the Jordan but God will tear open the heavens for his viewing or something else amazing.

Whatever happens, just don't let this influential, wealthy potential convert walk away, right? That would be the worst way to handle this!

And yet that's exactly what Elisha does – lets him walk away. Why on earth would he do that? Is the prophet an uncaring jerk? No. No, he'd do that so that God could show His power, working through His word and not human inventions or additions or appeals.

To be sure, we should strive to be friendly and welcoming, but such things can never match the power of God's word, and without the word they are absolutely useless.

Once more, it will be Naaman's servants who point him back to what God has spoken. They remind him of what the Lord said through the prophet's messenger. "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?'"

Naaman, like all of us afflicted with sin, didn't want God's simplicity, God's word. He wanted a show. He wanted something that would appeal to His feelings and emotions. He wanted something that would make sense to him. But that's not what God gave him.

God gave Naaman His word, simple and plain. God gives us His word, simple and plain. “Wash, and be clean.” “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.” “This is my body.” “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

It is God’s word, read, spoken, preached, joined to the physical in the Sacraments, that God uses to bring people to Himself, cleanse them from their sins, and keep them in the one true faith. It is the Word, the Gospel, that is the power of God unto salvation.

Our sinful natures are always chasing after signs, after feelings, after experiences. The world tells us that without such appeal, we the Church will cease to exist. But these things are not what creates faith, nor what faith seeks after. Just look at the centurion from the Gospel lesson. What does he say to Christ? “Only say the word.” Just the word, spoken from the mouth of God in the flesh, that’s all the centurion needs. Nothing more is necessary.

It is that word of God that brought the universe into existence. It is that word made flesh who declared from the cross that “It is finished,” having paid for the sin of the whole world. It is that word which is the rock upon which Christ builds His Church such that the gates of hell will never prevail against her.

This word, spoken once more to Naaman by his servants, brings him to repentance and trust. He hears and obeys, washing in the Jordan seven times, “and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” God’s word, spoken through servants and messengers of prophets and even little slave girls, proved true, for its source and power is the Almighty Himself.

Such is this power that the word worked an even greater miracle than the restoration of Naaman’s flesh. Through it, God cleansed Naaman’s heart, granting him not just the flesh of a little child but the faith of a little child. This prideful man, secure in his power and position, is humbled and led to confess, “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.”

Already, hundreds of years before the Lord will take on flesh, He is gathering in His children from all nations, Jews and Greeks, and doing so through His Word.

That word is what will sustain us His Church, now and forever. Not our limited knowledge or sin-corrupted reasoning. Not our cultural idols of having fun and being comfortable. Not programs recycled from corporate boardrooms or seminars. The word of God will do this, for it is the power of God unto salvation.

Seek this word. Hear this word. Share this word. Treasure this word above anything else in this life, for in it are the promises of God for you.

In the name of Jesus, amen.