

Foreign Aid 2 Kings 5:1-14(15)

I'm not a huge fan of movies based on Biblical stories – The Ten Commandments, those sorts of movies. For my taste they're a little over the top corny, and not very accurate, besides. But I have to admit, the story Jerry read from 2nd Kings is one that would really make a good movie. In fact, it might even be better told as a movie than the straightforward narrative form that we have in these few verses. You have to admit, the human drama kind of got lost in the hands of the writer, who at best, would have gotten a C in English. But in the hands of a skilled director, we might actually be able to see and feel the desperation and degradation of Namaan, a powerful man of war, laid low by his debilitating disease. We might be able to see the ambivalence playing across the face of his wife's servant as she whispers about a healer in a distant land, torn between her loyalty to her ailing foreign master, and her allegiance to her homeland, Israel. On the big screen we could feel the heightened sense of drama as we accompanied Namaan on his long and maybe even treacherous journey, his quest, and in those final moments of the film as the music swelled and his scabbed and scarred flesh became as soft and smooth as a child's, we would share in the joy of his healing and triumphant return home, well and whole at last.

And that is just the short version of the story, the one the lectionary gives us. It's not the whole story, though, and as dramatic as it is, it isn't nearly as compelling as the long version.

The names of the kings of Israel and Aram aren't given here, but what we can gather is that the roots of this story reach all the way back into 1st Kings. The rotten Ahab is still king, and Israel is at war with Aram. Booty is stolen, captives are taken back to Aram to be domestic servants, and ultimately Ahab is killed (for the ickier version of that story, I refer you back to chapter 22). He is succeeded first by one son, Ahaziah, who is no better than his father, and then by another, Jehoram, most likely the king mentioned in this story.

So if you followed all that political intrigue, you can imagine what must have gone on in Jehoram's mind when a letter arrives from the monarch of Aram saying 'heal my general.' The memory of the war with Aram is still fresh, and not only that, this is the guy who was responsible for his father's death. In Jehoram's mind, this isn't an appeal for humanitarian aid, it's an international crisis. Think about how he would have interpreted it. Given their history, the letter might as well have said something like this: "Please pick up the Sea of Galilee and move it over ten miles to the east. Failure to do this will result in swift and severe military action against Israel." This was a no-win situation for him. Do the impossible or we attack you and you'll meet the same end your pathetic old man did.

Elisha's big scene in the story would have provided the movie some comic relief in the midst of all the drama and intensity. Elisha is home, watching golf on the TV and snacking on peanuts when one of his servants tells him that there is an important man at the door, a foreigner, who has come to be healed. And without ever leaving the couch or taking his eyes off the TV set, Elisha tells him to tell their visitor to go down to the river, hop in and out of it seven times, and he'll be good as new.

Is it any wonder that Namaan pitched such a fit? Here he expects to be treated like a foreign dignitary and be put up in the VIP suite, or at least be offered a cold drink after his journey, and his personal physician can't even bring himself to get off the sofa to see him. He's given a lame treatment plan – bathe in a dirty river – and dismissed without even a follow-up appointment. Someone in his position should expect to be treated better than that!

Namaan's tirade is interrupted by yet another one of his humble, lowly servants who diplomatically points out that he's acting like a child, and if what he really wants is to be healed, not to be treated like an important person, then he might as well give it a shot. Couldn't hurt anything, right?

And of course, what Namaan and all of us learn in the end is that the only truly important player in this whole story is God. Namaan's not healed because he is such a great or deserving man, or because of his faith, but just because he needs it. Elisha isn't given the gift of healing because of anything he's done to earn it; he is simply the tool God has chosen to use at that given moment in time. The water itself holds no magical, restorative powers. It's just a medium, a symbol for cleansing. God heals Namaan, and for no other reason than that God has mercy on him. Namaan is sick, beaten down, broken, and God's intention is that we be well, whole, and strong.

And that's where the movie would end, at least if we stop the story at verse 14, where the lectionary does. It would be a dramatic, humorous story about healing. But look what happens when we go one verse further: *Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."* Namaan, the Aramean, is not only healed, not only whole again, he is converted; he is a believer, all because he has found help in Israel. It is a story about healing, yes. But on the July 4th weekend, you could also say that it is a story about what it means to be a great nation, blessed by God.

Way, way back, when God first came to Abram to make a covenant with him, he said he would not only give this childless man a son, but that he would make a great nation of him; a blessed nation. And here's the part we often forget – he would bless them so that they could be a blessing to the rest of the world. Israel would be special, distinct, but only because God had chosen them to be the demo model. They would learn how to love God and each other, then they, in turn, would demonstrate that to the other nations and peoples of the world. They would be a 'light to the nations,' that's what the prophet Isaiah often reminded them.

When Namaan showed up on Elisha's doorstep, Elisha might have been sorely tempted to turn him away. After all, he was an Aramean, and they were the enemy, they were heathens. And besides, if he let this one in and healed him there was a good chance that they would be overrun with foreigners looking for help. He might have told himself that this gift God had given him was for Israelites exclusively; since they were God's chosen people.

But he didn't. He healed him. Why? Because God is a God of peace and wholeness. God wants us all, every one of us, to have life that is abundant, not a life of suffering or hunger or loneliness or grief or heartache. So Elisha showed him what sort of God they followed and what that God was capable of. He showed him compassion. And Namaan got the message.

When I was in elementary school we lived in a town called New Canaan, named, I assume, by colonists who hoped and supposed that this new home of theirs would be just that, the new promised land. And ever since then there has been the same temptation that the Israelites had, to believe that we are God's favorite, God's chosen above all other nations for honor and glory.

Now, I'm not here to debate whether or not it is true that America is the new Canaan, a land grant given by God, or even whether we ought to call ourselves a Christian nation or not. Those roads are too fraught with danger and controversy to even risk going there. What would serve us better this morning is to remind ourselves that if we are, indeed, blessed by God, it is so that we can be a blessing to others; so that we can be a light to the nations. God does not confer greatness lightly. We have no cause to claim top dog status, to claim that our might and wealth put us in a position of power over others, even benevolent power. If we *are* great, independent, free, rich in resources, then we are equally rich in responsibility. We don't have any right to strut or be proud or guard our many blessings so no one else can get to them. If someone comes to us hungry, we need to feed them. If someone comes to us sick, we need to heal them.

Remember what we said about why Namaan was healed? It was for no other reason than that God chose to. God is a God of peace and wholeness and love. And if God alleviates suffering, shouldn't that be our purpose, too? To freely share the gifts that God has given us? To show hospitality to those in need, not put up walls to keep them out? Think of all of the vulnerable people in the Bible who ventured out in search of help: think of the sojourners Abraham and Sarah; think of Jacob's family, reunited with Joseph in Egypt when they fled there during a famine, looking desperately for food. Think of Naomi and her family in the book of Ruth, who left Bethlehem and journeyed to Moab in search of food. Think of Namaan, seeking healing from the prophet from Israel, when there was no help for him at home.

If we are a mighty nation, if we have, in fact, been blessed by God, then the only way we can look at our blessing and our purpose is in a missional sense. We are in a position of strength so that we can be in a position of generosity and compassion. What we have is not ours to keep, to clutch at, to claim that we have built and earned and deserve, but so that the love and mercy of God will be known, so that God's will will be done.

Our independence is something to celebrate. It is a gift. But it is a gift that comes with obligations; it is a gift to be shared to the glory of God, and the blessing of others.