

“An Unexpected Blessing”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 7, 2019

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Anytime I go on a mission trip with our church, I have to alter my normal morning routine. Normally, when I’m at home, I get up, go in our bathroom, and take a shower, not only to bathe, but also to wake my mind and body up to face the day ahead. But when I’m on a mission trip, like we were a week ago in New Albany, Indiana, I switch things up. I get up, change my clothes, throw a baseball cap on my head to cover my dirty, disheveled hair, and head out to work for the day. Then, after getting very sweaty and dirty during the day, I peel my work clothes off and take a cool shower – which feels absolutely wonderful!

At the church we stayed at last week, we had a shower – but it had some issues. One was the height. For those of us who were over 5 feet 10 inches, we had to bend down quite a bit to get our head wet. Second was the water pressure. It wasn’t the best. I know that water-saver shower heads are supposed to save water. But when you have to spend twice as long in the shower to wash, I don’t really know if it’s achieving its intended purpose!

So, last Saturday, after we had dropped everyone off and taken the rental vans back and I got home, I made a bee-line to our bathroom. I turned on the shower, got in, and just stood there for like five minutes before I started bathing. It felt like I was in a waterfall compared to the showers we had for that week on the mission trip!

It’s no wonder that for many of us, taking a shower or bath is so cathartic. We are not only physically cleansed of what soils us on the surface, there is also a sense of inner cleansing, where our soul is restored to newness because we feel better on the outside. It’s not surprising, then, that in the biblical witness, this image of bathing is used as an analogy of God’s transforming grace. The most obvious illustration of this is in baptism, as with Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan, he is clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit as he emerges from under the water. It is the same image we use today when we administer the sacrament: we die to sin as we submerge under the water, and are alive to all that is good as we rise from the surface.

Taking this physical and spiritual bath is at the heart of the story of Naaman, which we have read from 2 Kings today. For him, it is about seeking physical cleansing from the leprosy which has hounded him his whole life, and the subsequent spiritual cleansing which comes from feeling restored to health. But it is also a provocative bath, for it is not done in a traditional way, and the agents of God who direct Naaman

along his path to cleanliness are not who he or we would expect. And yet, in the end, what Naaman seeks is granted to him by God, and we are reminded that no one is turned away from God's grace, if only they believe.

Who was Naaman, and why is that important to this story? Barbara Brown Taylor describes this warrior of the Aramites in the following way:

Naaman shows up about halfway through (the book of Kings), in the ninth century before Christ, when Jehoam was king of Israel. Although Israel and her neighbor Aram (which we know as Syria) were frequently at war, they were momentarily at peace. Aram had the better army, however, and Israel knew it. Israel even knew the name of the commander of the Aramean army, since he had beaten up on them more than once. His name was Naaman, which means "pleasant" – an unlikely name for a warrior, perhaps – but even his enemies admitted Naaman was a great man, whom God had favored in battle. Think Colin Powell, only with one important difference. Naaman did not photograph well. He had leprosy, which was not as big a problem for a Syrian as it might have been for a Jew, but which ate away at Naaman in more ways than one

(Barbara Brown Taylor, Home by Another Way, 156).

So, here's this great and noble man, who has done tremendous things for the Arameans, and yet feels personally tormented by this skin condition which is extremely unsightly. He would do anything to rid himself of his leprosy, willing to even go to the enemy – the Israelites – if that would make a difference.

What's fascinating about this story is God's activity through those who are lowly, non-descript, unassuming – all to bring about God's blessing and glory. The first is Naaman's wife's slave girl, who was captured from Israel in a raid, who mentions that the prophet Elisha could heal her husband of his terrible disease. Naaman takes this message to his king, and the Aramite king sends him to Israel with hopes that this will help his commander. When the king of Israel receives Naaman and the letter from his king, he cannot believe that Naaman is there in good faith, and is convinced that it is a trick, saying, "Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" But Elisha hears of the king's outburst, and urges him instead to send Naaman to him, "that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

Naaman is willing to do just about anything to get rid of his leprosy, and he quickly asks for directions to Elisha's house. So, here comes Naaman with all his horses, chariots, servants, and other worldly possessions, expecting a grand meeting between himself and the prophet of Israel. Instead, for the second time in the story, a servant has a starring role. Elisha sent his messenger to Naaman and told him to "wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be made clean." Naaman is furious. Why can't the prophet himself

come and say this to him directly? Does he not know who is out here at his front door? And the Jordan of all rivers to bathe in? “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” Naaman is outraged and offended, to say the least.

But for the third time in this fascinating narrative, it is a servant who comes and rescues the day. His servants must have known Naaman pretty well – well enough to know that he was more hurt than mad – because they tiptoed up to him and convinced him to give it a try. If he had given you something hard to do, you would have done it, they reasoned with him. So, he gave you something simple. So? (Taylor 160). That prodding got Naaman down to the banks of the Jordan, got him to take off his clothes, and got him to dunk his head beneath the water seven times. On the last time, he emerged from the water with smooth skin, with no signs of his leprosy remaining.

In this story, we see God working through some of the lowliest and most unassuming characters – the Jewish slave girl, the messenger of Elisha, Naaman’s servants. Maybe what’s intriguing about this is not that they were the ones giving the words of wisdom to Naaman, but that he eventually listened to them and followed their guidance. Most everyone in this world who are considered the lowliest around us have words of wisdom to speak. But all too often we are too busy expecting things to play out the way we had planned that we don’t have time to hear their words of wisdom.

Have you experienced that in your life? Perhaps you came to church, hoping that the preacher would be the one who would speak directly to you the words you needed to hear from God. But on that particular Sunday, it wasn’t the words spoken from a pulpit that blessed you; instead, it was the caring look or warm embrace or intentional welcome from those sitting around you that unexpectedly blessed you at that moment in time.

Perhaps you offered to volunteer your time at your child’s school, or you said yes to spend an evening at a local homeless shelter, or you decided to go with a group from church on a mission trip – all of which gave you the impression that you would be the conduit of God’s grace to the lowly, less-fortunate, and needy of this world. But what you experienced was the opposite – you were blessed by those you served, through acts of kindness, words of gratitude, and models of sacrifice. God unexpectedly blessed you through the lives of those you were serving.

The key to receiving God’s blessings is to not be afraid of where those blessings might come from. Sometimes, in order to know God to the fullest, we have to let go of our desire for control, and simply allow God to act – and in so doing, we will be bathed in the loving, healing grace that is offered to us as children of God.

That was Naaman's wish, and through the grace of God in the prophet Elisha, he was shown a better day. All Naaman had to do was follow directions. All he had to do was empty himself out, abandoning the pretense that who he was or what he was worth could get him what he needed. All he had to do was strip himself down until his hurt flesh was exposed for everyone to see and go play in the water like a little boy. Then God did for him what military victories and kings and bags of money could never do. God restored his flesh. God created him all over again, and he was made new (Taylor 161).

May God do the same to us, if only we shed our pretenses at the door. Thanks be to God. Amen.