



## ***Down to the River***

A sermon for Northminster Church

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Reading the Bible with a lens of love: This has been our goal over the last few months in our Sunday School class that we've affectionately titled, "How do you solve a problem like the Bible?" As we work through the pages of scripture, we are attempting to read its many, diverse stories through the lens of love, using the life and teachings of Jesus as our interpretive key for those times when it's really difficult to make sense of what we're reading. Rarely do we come across actual words from Jesus interpreting another story in the Bible directly, but that *is* what we find here as the Jesus of Luke 4 interprets the story of Naaman and Elisha from 2 Kings 5. So, let's seize the opportunity to put ourselves there, and hear the story as Jesus calls it to mind for his listeners, and watch as the story does its work on them.

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There was a clamor and a jostling for the best seats as more worshipers than usual gathered in the synagogue in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth on the Sabbath. They wanted to hear from this hometown boy with their own ears, wanted to see what it was he had been saying in other parts of the country that had garnered him so much admiration, that had inspired so many (frankly) unbelievable stories about him. A few older men offered a grunt of affirmation as Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and they watched him unroll it to the sixty-first chapter. They knew this one. They liked this one. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me," he

began, and they almost chanted it with him, “because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” – their eyes were closed, their mouths moving silently as they encountered the familiar words – “to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” A few mouths were still moving on to the next line about proclaiming the day of God’s vengeance on their enemies when they heard Jesus abruptly begin to roll the scroll back up, claiming, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” *Why would he stop short?* one of them wondered. *He left out the best part!* thought another, and a third leaned over to his neighbor, whispering, “What’s he got against showing our enemies who’s really in charge?”

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A thousand years earlier, Israel was locked in a national conflict with Aram, or Syria as we call it today, and it wasn’t going well for Israel. Syria’s armies had overpowered them. They raided their villages and dragged their terrified citizens away from their homes to serve as slaves in a foreign land. Israel faced a dispiriting defeat. Leading this great and terrible Syrian army was a man named Naaman. He was strong, victorious, and wealthy, spending time in the company of only the most important people, even the king himself. Through and through, Naaman was a conqueror, a national hero. When Syrian children played, they fought each other for who got to be Naaman. But as it turns out, leprosy has no respect for rank, age, or wealth. It was like cancer, a disease with no regard for who we think should be immune. Even for this man who seemed to have every means of shielding himself from suffering, suffering had come all the same.

*Not such a bad thing*, the faithful in Jesus’ own day might have thought. *A general of our enemy’s army, the man responsible for prying sons and daughters of the people of Israel out of their mothers’ arms and into a life of captivity – and now he’s suffering from a humiliating, life-threatening disease. ...Serves him right*, they might have been tempted to say. *Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.*

While on one of their raids, the Syrians had stolen a little Israelite girl, and put her to work in the service of Naaman's wife. It is this nameless little girl who changed everything.

"If only my lord Naaman were with the prophet who is in Samaria," she said one day to her mistress, "he would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman was desperate enough that he listened to the little, foreign, slave girl, and after mulling it over, after watching the leprosy spread, he heeded her advice. Naaman went straight to the king of Syria. He shared the little girl's account of the prophet-healer in Israel, and asked for leave to seek his healing.

Thus began the grand and ridiculous exchange of the kings. It went something like this: The king of Syria wrote to the king of Israel, saying, "I am sending you Naaman, a general who is very important to me, so that you can cure him of his leprosy." Obviously, you see, as men of great power and importance, they must go to other men of great power and importance to get anything done. In other words, they totally missed the point. The little girl would never have sent Naaman to a king, because if she remembered the stories of Elijah and Elisha, she remembered that nine times out of ten, kings are useless. The whole book of Kings is story after story of kings trusting in their own power, falling into corruption or cluelessness, and winding up either insignificant or the story's villain.

So, standing in a long line of inadequate kings, the king of Israel, predictably, panicked. When Naaman showed up with mountains of silver and gold and all sorts of gifts, the king only saw a provocation. "He's asking me for what he knows I can't give him!" he lamented. "Am I God, to give death or life? The king sends word to *me* to cure a man of his leprosy?!"

While this was happening, some distance away, the real prophet heard about the king's panic. He called his messenger to him, shaking his head, and dictated his rebuke. "Why are you so rattled?" he wrote to the king. "Stop, open your eyes and see what God is doing. Let this man come to me, then he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So, back in the city, Naaman repacked his silver, his gold, his gifts, and his servants and set off away from the circus of the royal palace.

As they went, something began to happen. The parade traveled down out of the city with its multitudes looking on in admiration and fear; then down into the outlying urban areas, where people stopped to gawk at his splendor; then down into the rural areas, where people looked at him in confusion; then, finally, out into the desert, where no one cared to look at them at all. They traveled all the way down to Elisha's modest hovel, where truthfully, they looked ridiculous. Elisha had invited Naaman into a place where his accomplishments and his reputation counted for nothing. Naaman, the great Syrian general, had stepped out of the world of his control, and arriving at the home of the prophet, and was not even granted the honor of a face-to-face conversation. Instead, Elisha sent out a servant, who instructed Naaman: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored. You will be clean." With that, the servant turned around and walked right back into the house.

Naaman's jaw hung open. Then his hands began to shake, and his teeth began to clench, and the words hissed out: "What?! He's not even going to look me in the face? Does he know who I am? This is not how it was supposed to happen! He was supposed to stand before me, call on the name of his God, wave his hand over this rot, and the power of his little God would come down and fix it!" The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. *The Jordan?! He remembered the muddy, sluggish little river they had passed on the way in. Aren't the rivers of Damascus better than anything in this backwater country?* He had traveled too far, made himself too vulnerable, and now this so-called prophet had dared to insult him. The messenger might as well have said, *Go rub some mud on it, it'll be good as new.* His servants made themselves scarce as Naaman was overcome with rage.

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Jesus could feel the tension rising in the room as he preached. Although the congregation had mostly nodded along politely as he expounded on the words of the prophet, he could tell his omission of Isaiah's thoughts on the vengeance of God had not gone unnoticed. And to be

honest, that was the point. That was why he had chosen such a familiar passage to read. The only question now was whether they would understand what he had meant by it.

As the people stood to gather up their belongings, around the room one would say to another, “Didn’t he stop a little short?” “Yes,” the other would say, “I could’ve sworn there was a part about God’s vengeance on our enemies...” And after they filed past Jesus, shaking his hand with a, “What a nice young man you’ve become,” or clapping him on the shoulder with a, “Good sermon, son,” he noticed that they lingered just outside the door to discuss what was weighing on them. *Was he sympathizing with Rome, or just too weak to say what needed to be said?* The questions began to spread. What other explanation could there be for a good Jew to withhold from preaching on the vengeance of God against the enemies of Israel? *Poor and oppressed, yes sir, right here,* one began to say to another with one hand raised. *Is he going to tell me my God’s not interested in setting right that wrong?* The rule of Rome was an iron fist; any Jew who didn’t declare God’s favor for Israel over all others was suspect – even one of their own sons. Their belief in God’s ultimate vengeance on their enemies was how they got to sleep at night. Who was Jesus to challenge that?

After greeting the last little old lady who had looked after him as a child, Jesus gathered his things and prepared for the confrontation he knew was coming with the sizeable crowd just outside the door. He tried to place himself in their shoes. Remembering that he, too, had once believed the narrative that God would take vengeance on Israel’s enemies, that God’s love for Israel somehow meant the rest of the world – even their oppressors – were any less God’s children, he took a deep breath and began. “Friends,” he said. “Many of you have known me since I was a child. Doubtless you will quote that old proverb to me: *Doctor, cure yourself!* And you’ll say, *Why can’t you do here in your hometown all the things we’ve heard about you doing everywhere else?*” He paused. “But you know why. A prophet’s words don’t seem to mean as much in his hometown. A critique from within your own household stings the pride, doesn’t it?” The questioning looks on his listeners’ faces had turned to something more severe. “There were lepers in Israel, too, you know, when Elisha prophesied,” he began, and he saw that it touched

a nerve. Enough of their friends and relatives had been struck by the disease that few of them even kept their heads long enough to hear what came next. “You think it mattered one bit to God that Naaman was a Syrian?”

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*I am a Syrian!* Naaman thought to himself as he walked. “I don’t have to take this,” he muttered under his breath, “not from these people.” He kicked up rocks as he walked along the dusty road, dragging his feet a little. Then he heard a voice. “Sir?” He whipped around to find a couple of his attendants.

“What?” Naaman asked. “Well, sir, it’s just that...if the prophet had told you to do something complex, something hard, wouldn’t you have done it? But all he said to you was, ‘Wash and be clean,’ and...” he trailed off, not wanting to step too far over the line. The other one finished for him, quietly, “Shouldn’t you at least try it, sir?”

At this suggestion, rage began to creep back into Naaman’s chest, but then something broke. For the first time, Naaman opened his eyes and looked at the men standing nervously before him, he looked down at his own decaying skin, and he knew that really, it made no difference if he was covered in mud. Who was he trying to impress anymore? So, he went down to the Jordan. Down he went, leaving behind the parade of riches, leaving behind the reputation and the glory; down he went, and stripped himself of his expensive clothes, stripped himself of his impressive armor, stripped himself of the persona, the nobility, and the pride. Naked in every way possible, he waded into the waters of the Jordan, and as he did, he was swept up in a story so much larger than himself. He took his place in the unfolding saga of the Israelites escaping bondage and searching for home across those waters, of Elijah taken up to glory on the river’s shore, of all those who would come after him to meet John the Baptist in the same waters, of you and me, and all of God’s children who have had their moment in the Jordan and emerged a

new creation. As Naaman rose from the water for the seventh time, his breath caught as he saw that his skin had become clean.

He returned to Elisha's hovel a new man, and found Elisha – this time – standing outside, waiting and ready to greet him. And the prophet of God welcomed Naaman, the Syrian, the enemy of God's people, home.

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"That's enough!" one man shouted, grabbing Jesus by the arm and tugging him into the mass of bodies that had crowded around. Other hands propelled him forward, other voices shouted obscenities, other egos gave in to their base instincts: prejudice, hatred, fear. *Of course, God cared that Naaman was a foreigner, the God of Israel had done him a favor.* This boy needed to be taught a lesson; this was not how they had raised him to think. If Jesus was suggesting that the story of Naaman meant God was more interested in tearing down walls between people than protecting the sanctity of Israel's identity, what would that mean for their future? Deep down, they knew there was no real hope of escaping Rome's chokehold on them, but it certainly didn't stop them from dreaming. And now this so-called prophet was trying to insinuate that they were the problem? That their patriotism might be in conflict with God's purposes? The cacophony of rage grew louder and louder until it peaked as the crowd reached the edge of town, coming to the cliffside, adrenaline rushing as they prepared to do their worst – until they noticed.

Jesus was not among them. In their frenzy to dispose of his ideas and his body along with them, they had somehow missed him entirely.

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Reading the scriptures with the lens of love calls us to examine the text, yes, but we cannot stop there. We must also examine ourselves. What fear keeps us from opening up? What hidden hatred manifests as condescension or prejudice? What pride would keep us from going down, and going down, and going down into the waters, from stripping ourselves of all that distinguishes us from one another, from breaking down the walls between us? Let perfect love cast out all our fears, and may we find when it does that we are one. Amen.