

## Wash and be Clean

**2 Kings 5:1-14 (15), (Luke 10:1-11 (16-20))**

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, July 7, 2019 (includes a baptism)*

After Emperor Franz Josef of Austria died in 1916, he was laid in state in his magnificent palace in Vienna, surrounded by exquisite floral arrangements, expensive fabrics, jewels and gold. On the day of the funeral, his body was taken to the church in an impressive hearse drawn by magnificent purebred horses. The king's attendant knocked loudly on the huge old wooden doors of the church, and what followed was a "knock, knock, who's there" with a twist. After the knock, a voice was heard from within, saying: "Who goes there?" "His Majesty Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary." Came the reply from within: "We do not know him." The emperor's attendant knocked again. Again, someone replied: "Who goes there?" "His Majesty Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary." Came the reply from within: "We do not know him." The attendant knocked a third time and heard again: "Who goes there?" This time, the attendant spoke softly and answered: "It is Franz Josef, a child of God." Soon, there was a loud noise as the massive bolts were drawn back, the doors were opened wide, and the interior of the magnificent church was made visible. The doorkeeper then said, "The Lord welcomes Franz Josef, a child of God. Him we know."<sup>1</sup>

All the pomp and circumstance, the titles and riches, the accolades are slowly stripped away to lay bare that our truest identity is simply and profoundly that of being children of God. This identity makes us all equals in our worth and our need. This sense of stripping away external trappings of power and influence for the sake of taking on a humble but blessed identity as a child of God lies also at the heart of our story from the Second Book of Kings. It also speaks to the beauty and meaning of Adeline Rae's baptism.

In our story, it is a powerful Aramean general who needs to ground his own identity in a new way. Namaan is a big man<sup>2</sup> used to wielding big power with the approval of his king.<sup>3</sup> Namaan

---

<sup>1</sup> Story taken from homileticsonline website (John D. Lane, "No partiality," January 11, 2004, *Trinity Church Web Site*, trinitystaunton.org)

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Robertson Farmer in *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY) 2010, 201. The Hebrew word used to describe Namaan imply that he was big of stature.

hails from today's Syria. The Arameans and Israelites were as much foes back then as they are today. As a general, Namaan is used to having his way but he struggles with "leprosy" that he cannot control. None of his usual tools and strengths are a source of help. What we translate as "leprosy" was a broad term for a number of skin conditions though most likely more severe than the brown tail moth caterpillar rash that has been plaguing so many of us. In Ancient Israel such conditions were seen as punishments, rendered people unclean, and led to their exclusion from the community. Thankfully, Jesus regularly reframed such thinking away from blame and judgment.<sup>4</sup>

As is quite typical in Biblical stories, seemingly powerless and marginal people become agents of God for the sake of others. An unnamed captured Israelite servant girl becomes the bridge between Namaan (her captor) and Elijah who is a prophet and healer in her homeland Israel.<sup>5</sup> Namaan gets a protective and instructive letter from his king and takes expensive gifts hoping for an open reception by the current Israelite king (2 Kings 5:5-6). However, the Israelite king is threatened by the request for healing. He is so engrossed in the machinations of power politics that he can only imagine that the Arameans are setting him up to fail in order to justify another war (2 Kings 5:7). After reading the letter, the Israelite king tears his clothes and exclaims, "Am I God, to give life or death ...." He is acknowledging that the ultimate source of healing is God but also demonstrating his own inattentiveness to God's presence and care.

Elijah gets word about the drama and calmly tells his own king to send Namaan on to him to experience that God is truly still at work in Israel. Namaan turns up in front of what was likely Elijah's extremely humble abode with all his entourage, including horses and chariots. Elijah doesn't appear but sends a messenger simply instructing Namaan to bathe in the Jordan seven

---

<sup>3</sup> According to the prophetic imagination of ancient Israel, God sometimes used foreign leaders and ordinary people to teach Israel important lessons or get rid of the unfaithful king Ahab (see 2 Kings 5:1). Whether we should conceive of world politics in this matter through the lens of Christ is another story. The Arameans defeated corrupt and unfaithful Israelite king Ahab and took over a chunk of Israelite territory under Namaan's leadership. Ahab had worshipped his wife Jezebel's foreign gods. Jezebel threatened to murder Elijah after he murdered a number of her priests. This story is played out in the First Book of Kings.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus, however, reframes suffering as not being a punishment but one of those occasions when God will use a difficult situation to manifest God's presence and care.

<sup>5</sup> After the reign of David, Israel was eventually divided into quarreling kingdom: Israel in the north (which included Samaria) and Judah in the south.

times, the same river in which Jesus would be baptized much later.<sup>6</sup> It may be hard for us to fathom the accumulations of insults from Namaan’s perspective. For starters, Namaan assumes that his power, wealth and status are his ticket to healing.<sup>7</sup> He had assumed that the prophet would come out personally and make some dramatic gesture (2 Kings 5:11). Secondly, the Jordan is a foreign river whose only significance is serving to separate Israel from its enemies (Num. 34:12).<sup>8</sup> If the cure involved bathing in a river, Namaan would want to bathe in his superior rivers at home. He gets angry and starts to walk away.

His servants know him well enough to have some compassion with Namaan’s stuckness. Again, it is the unnamed and seemingly powerless people who open the door to healing for him. They affectionately appeal to Namaan’s great ability to accomplish the most difficult tasks. “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash and be clean (2 Kings 5:13)’?” (I can only imagine how many among us who have endured difficult illnesses and harrowing treatments wish to be offered such a path toward healing.) The servants are able to get through to him enough to let go of his pride and expectations and simply trust the prophet. After bathing seven times, “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean (2 Kings 5:14).” It was the actual experience of trusting God’s power to restore him that transformed Namaan. His trust was made more pertinent precisely by the lack of fanfare.

Namaan’s story suggests that our wholeness and our receiving God’s love and healing care are not be tied to our accomplishments, external societal power and status, assigned roles and material resources. This is a potent reminder of how God’s ways are not our ways (to quote from Isaiah). In our story, God’s healing is also not limited to the people of Israel but extended even to those they might consider enemies. Thankfully, there are many heartening stories about organizations like Doctors without Borders that reach out to provide care of people in

---

<sup>6</sup> (“Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be clean (2 Kings 5:10).” The numbers 3,7, 12 and 40 are particularly important numbers in the Bible. They tend to denote wholeness and completion. The seven days likely relate to the seven days of creation. Of course, we envision the process of creation differently today.

<sup>7</sup> Carrie Mitchell in *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY) 2010, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Trevor Eppheimer in *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY) 2010, 200.

zones of great poverty and conflict irregardless of a person's status or societal and national divisions. Let us also remember that the people receiving care often come to the attention of those who can help thanks to the countless seemingly ordinary people who build the bridges for others in need – just like in our story. We, too, can help build such bridges.

I wonder whether Namaan's restoration to a body with youth like skin signifies a more existential and innocent identification as a child of God. According to the what follows in our story, Namaan acknowledges the God of Israel as his God. Perhaps we can think of his washing in the Jordan seven times (to signify completion in the context of the biblical process of creation) as a rebirth and baptism of sorts. We baptize Adeline Rae today to welcome her into the family of faith. We are here to remind Adeline that she is a beloved child of God from the beginning and that there is nothing that will have the power to change that. Trusting this love and living out of this love will become the greatest challenge and invitation of her life.

Today, her parents and godparents, family members and this church family will promise to model for her and live out of that same trust. We will promise to resist all that seeks to tear down what God's love builds up and we will promise to walk with her along the journey of life as a disciple or follower of Christ. It is a journey of loving God and our neighbor as we go on loving ourselves. The Gospel text about the sending forth of the disciples without the external trappings of comfort and control reminds us that ours is a journey of letting go of the concerns of a separate ego that prefers to identify itself by its own power and agenda. Like Namaan and those who came bearing Emperor Franz, we need to remember that our deepest identity lies in being beloved children of God, bathed in baptismal waters alongside Jesus. Out of this belovedness, Adeline Rae can grow into her full stature and bless the world with the gifts with which God has blessed her so freely. Thanks be to God!