

Pentecost VI (14C)
II Kings 5.1-19a/*Galatians* 6.1-18/*Luke* 10.1-20
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
8 July 2007

Muddy Waters

~Paul H. Friesen~

Last Sunday we talked about Elisha and Elijah and the chariot of fire, and also about the disciples, and Jesus, and Jesus' words—that had had nowhere to lay his head.

So many of our Scriptures talk about journeys. So I said that it was no mistake that the life of Christ, God incarnate in Jesus, is the long stanza in the middle of the great Creed that we repeat week by week; the life of Christ moving from eternity and conception to life and death and resurrection and ascension.

And it is no mistake that Christians are meant not just to 'believe', but to actually *follow* Christ—accepting and entering into our pilgrimage through the life God has given to us. It is the life Christ walks through ahead of us, feeling and knowing all the twists and turns and tunnels and valleys before we meet them ourselves. We don't know where we will walk, but we can know that we do not walk alone.

Today's Scriptures pick up where we left off. We heard the beautiful phrases of 3000 year-old Hebrew poetry: 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.' And in the Epistle we hear how it is that God makes this possible through his body, the church: 'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,' said St. Paul.

But we hear this morning of two very particular journeys. Both are meant to help us walk behind Christ, both meant to illuminate our pathway to the New Jerusalem, our true home—just as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was intended to do a few centuries ago. The *first* is the story of one person, undertaking a journey for a cause he regretted—a journey he almost quit. The *second* is the story of a group sent on a mission they almost misunderstood. Both are meant to be journeys of faith in which we can find ourselves, though they unfolded long before Bunyan was born, thousands of years ago and half-way around the world.

The *first story*, the story of Naaman, is tragic and comic at the same time. His tragic predicament is summed up at the beginning: 'The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.' On the other hand, the dark comedy of his progress to health turns up at almost every corner of his journey.

'Leprosy' was the ancient scourge of the human flesh often mentioned in the Scriptures. It was used then to talk about a variety of ancient afflictions from moderate rashes to the devastating disease we still know as leprosy today, still gnawing away at some sad corners of our world.

Naaman's affliction, it has been pointed out, was at the less serious end of the ancient variety.¹ It did not keep him from the company of his family nor ban him from public life. But it was a persistent flaw a mighty man could do without. And so at the first sign of hope he sets out hoping for a cure. It is on this journey that the *healing of Naaman's body* (much desired by him) takes place. But it is eclipsed by the healing of his soul (something he resisted each step of the way). And it is this *'healing of the soul'* in particular that we are meant to take to heart ourselves.

In the very first line of the story we hear that Naaman was 'commander of the army of the King Aram...a great man and in high favour with his master [the King].' Naaman was second only to the king in Damascus, the capital of Aram, we hear because God had granted Naaman repeated military victories—something he didn't care to understand. And so the dignity Naaman stands on is chipped away line by line.

Naaman hears of the cure from his wife, who has heard it from a Jewish servant-girl, picked up as plunder by one of Naaman's generals in a cross-border raid before an 'uneasy peace' was declared between the two neighbouring nations.

Being who he is, Naaman's servant girl's information is set aside and the King of Aram sends a delegation directly to the King of Israel and diplomatic confusion and accusations follow. Finally Elisha, the prophet in the ragged old mantle of his departed master Elijah, hears about it all through his sources and with a mocking voice he offers to help the King. So far it has not gone too well for Naaman. Kings are of no help whatsoever, everything hangs on the word of servant-girl and the intervention of a despised and contrary holy man.

It gets worse. That is the comedy gets darker. Naaman arrives at the prophet's humble and distant house with horses and chariots and money and gifts but the prophet doesn't bother to show his face. Instead Elisha makes things more intolerable: he sends his own scruffy servant to tell Naaman to wash in the muddy Jordan—seven times.

Naaman wanted a proper Harry Potter moment to mark his cure: 'I thought that *for me* he (Elisha) would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!'

¹ John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1964), p.453.

But for the third time the great Naaman is shown the way by humble servants, who this time persuade him to give up his self-righteous rage and to simply do what he was told to do. And so the story winds up with the 'mighty man' Naaman healed, his 'flesh restored like the flesh of a *young boy*'. A young boy: all the might and power has evaporated, and Naaman has regained the beauty and simplicity of childhood by leaving behind his 'big man' status.²

Naaman is a changed man, we discover in the epilogue. So Elisha is waiting to greet him in person upon his return from the river. It's not because Naaman's theology is perfect. Having refused the muddy waters of the Jordan, Naaman now begs for baskets of Jewish dirt, to make a little shrine to the Lord in his own land, as if the Lord went with the land. Yet the humility of his request is a sign of the healing of his soul.³

And Naaman begs an indulgence. Please, Naaman says to Elisha; 'Please know that I am faking worship to our nation's god, the thunder-god Rimmon, when I am obliged to bow to the idols as I enter the great temple? I won't really mean it!

Elijah doesn't correct him, or excuse him, but simply blesses him: 'Go in peace,' Elijah says. For Elijah has seen Naaman's new-found humility and heard him promise to offer sacrifices only to the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth. Naaman has given up trying to control his journey and instead put his life in the hands of the one who made him.

Of course it is just as hard for most of us Christians as it was for Naaman, the ancient pagan warrior.

We won't admit it perhaps, but we think we've settled both where our path leads through life, and how exactly we are going to get there. This story reminds us about what the ancient prophets knew about God—it wasn't a matter of getting every decision right, and reaching every right conclusion. It wasn't a matter of always being physically healed, of avoiding pain—or of possessing dignity that raised one above others. Rather it was always a matter of learning the humility to follow where God led, and of giving thanks for the gifts God grants for everyone's journey.

If it is hard for us to let go of our foolish desire to control our journey, it is rather easy to imagine that God is pleased with us as a church for the wrong reasons. It is too easy to bring the wrong ambitions with us to our shared life of worship and mission as communities of Christians.

In the Gospel the disciples are sent out by Jesus, to prepare his way: 'The Lord appointed seven others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.' They have followed

² See, Robert Cohn, *2 Kings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), p.38.

³ See, Robert Cohn, *2 Kings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), p.38.

him, and now they go before him as his heralds. They turn out to be faithful and they bring good news back: 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' Jesus enthusiastically confirms this: 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'

But there is a 'nevertheless'—and whenever there is one, or a 'but' or a 'yet' in the words of Jesus, we are meant to take notice, and not skip over them to sing out words of triumph. 'Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this that the spirits submit to you,' said Jesus, 'but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

How often Christian communities—and Anglican parishes—forget this! 'Lord in your name we have passed motions (or defeated motions) at Synod...we have pushed back the forces of secularism...we have been impressively relevant...important people are in our congregation...we have a beautiful sanctuary or high technology or both...we have raised money and attracted crowds...we have...we have.' But Jesus says, 'Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

'Our names are written...' It is a reference often made in the Scripture in relation to the children of Israel, the ancient cities of faith, the New Jerusalem, the baptismal rolls of the ancient church. St. Cyril of Jerusalem reflected upon this as he read these words, long, long ago in the *Gospel According to St. Luke*: '[Jesus] was baptized so that he might give dignity to those who receive the sacrament.'⁴

It was the same Jordan in which Naaman washed that Jesus was baptized, according to all four Gospels.⁵ It is the same baptism we practice today. No personal distinction or accomplishment, or even might work for God will get you a place around the Lord's Table. We are all in the same book as Jesus Christ. We need only accept that and live in the light of that wonderful truth as we walk out of the church porch this morning and into the rest of our life.

Amen.

⁴ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p.175-176.

⁵ *John* 1.24-34; *Luke* 3.21-22; *Mark* 1.9-11; *Matthew* 3.13-17.