

2 Kings 5:1-14, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
(*Baptism of Samuel Abram*)

Grace and peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

One of my favorite TV shows does this thing, usually about two-thirds or three-quarters of the way through the season: they have an entire episode that is devoted to a minor character, or even a character that has never been part of the show before. You know what I mean, the “Also Starring” or the “With” or sometimes even listed as “Tonight’s Special Guest.” They’re usually fun episodes, offbeat, exploring an aspect of the show that is not generally seen, and often times those episodes end up being among some of my favorites of that season, if not even THE favorite episode of the season. And, I think part of the reason is because the main character of the show is there in the story line, but to a much lesser degree. Almost often times to just being a cameo shot. And I have noticed this not only in my favorite show, but in a couple of other shows that I watch. I understand that from a production point of view it is so that the primary character can finish work on some of the other episodes and so that they have some time to do some extra shoots and what not. But these “other” characters are the ones that fill in these episodes. I say all of this because our first lesson tonight is a lot like one of those episodes.

Our main character for the first thirteen chapters in 2 Kings is the prophet Elisha. But in our story tonight he barely shows up and when he does, he is given not his normal Front Line roll, but just a bit part almost. In our story Naaman is a high ranking officer in the Aramean army. He has fought Israel before and he has won. He thinks really highly of himself. He is a warrior, he’s a leader of men, and he suffers from leprosy. Now, leprosy in scripture, we need to remember, is not necessarily what we know as Hanson’s Disease. Hanson’s Disease is when nerves die, our extremities are very easily injured and often times infected limbs end up being lost. In scripture though, leprosy refers to any kind of skin ailment. It could be eczema; it could be a birthmark; it could be that you’re an albino; it could be that you have loads of freckles. It could even be a bad case of acne, or it could be Hanson’s Disease. All of those are considered “leprosy.” We don’t know exactly what it is that Naaman is suffering from, although from the fact that he was a military leader, if he was missing limbs it was probably due more to battle than having leprosy.

But there is this almost throw away little comment from a young slave girl from Israel that causes Naaman to begin this quest for a cure. He seeks permission from his king who in turn sends Naaman - along with a boat-load of cash - over to the king of Israel. (Remember at this point of history, Israel is the northern geographically larger kingdom, the geographically smaller kingdom of Judah where Jerusalem is, is in the south.) But the King of Aram sends to the king of Israel demanding, **demanding** that he heal Naaman of his leprosy. This is unbelievable;

no one can do this; this hasn't been done before. So the king of Israel sees it for the only way that he can see it, that it is a plot by the King of Aram to begin another war. This would be a lot like the President of the United States sending a letter to the President of Afghanistan demanding that the US General who is delivering the letter be cured of whatever disease that he has. The geography isn't quite right, we're too far away from Afghanistan, but the size of the country and the politics involved, that's about the same kind of a situation that this is - a much more powerful country demanding that a smaller country do something that no one else in the WORLD is capable of doing. We really shouldn't be surprised at the manner in which the King of Israel responds. Now fortunately for the king, though, Elisha gets wind of this, and he sends word (I love the way that Elisha says this), he says "let him come to me that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." (v8a)

So Naaman, being a good soldier, takes his orders and goes to Elisha's place. Now we don't know anything about Elisha's home, we don't know what town he lives in, we don't know how big his house is, we don't know how nice of a place he has. Maybe he is living in the old section of Camp Hill with those big lawns and the huge trees; maybe he's got a place somewhere up along Country Club Road; maybe he's here in the borough, with one of those nice single family homes, smaller lot. Maybe he's in the apartments backed up against 581. We don't know exactly where Elisha lives. What we do know though is that Naaman shows up at his door and he is expecting to be healed. To have some kind of a big show put on. He's at least expecting to be treated as respectfully as his position as a high ranking officer in the Aramean Army demands.

What does Elisha do? He sends a servant. He sends a servant NOT to escort Naaman inside, he sends a servant NOT to offer Naaman some refreshments while he WAITS for Elisha. Elisha sends the servant to Naaman to tell him to "go wash in the river seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." (V10) Well, Naaman reacts much like any of us would expect a man of his position and power to react when he perceives that he is not being treated in the manner in which he is accustomed. "You want me to go wash in the Susquehanna, well no way! I've seen what you people PUT in that river. I am not going to go wash there, I am going to go back home and wash in the Monongahela.", and he storms off in a rage, which if the letter to Israel was NOT an attempt to at war, then this perceived slight on Naaman's part definitely is.

Fortunately for all involved, some less egoistical tongues get involved here. One of Naaman's servants says this rather ego massaging thing. "If the prophet told you to go do something grand and glorious, wouldn't you have done it gladly? He's not telling you to do something demeaning, like to roll around inside of some animal carcass. All he's asking you to do is go for a swim. Look, it's a hot day, the river's right here, would it really kill you just to jump in, go for a swim, seven times?"

Naaman relents. He goes to the river, he washes seven times and his flesh is restored. And actually I thought it was rather appropriate considering Samuel's

baptism here tonight, the way that Naaman flesh was described, that it was "restored like the flesh of a young boy," and that's where the story ends.

So where was Elisha in all of this? Did you notice how Elisha wasn't really involved in that story, he wasn't central to it. He was kind of out on the edges, maybe only seen for a moment or two. You could say the same as well about the Lord God Almighty, not really front and center. Yet, would any part of this story, any part of this healing, this miracle, have taken place if the Lord God had NOT been involved? How often in our own lives do we tend to push God out on the periphery, out to the edges of our lives, off to the corners? Put God in a closet so I can say to myself, okay, I know where God is, God's stowed away nice and safe and then I can go to God anytime I want, anytime I need God, but I really don't have to have God with me all the time.

Just like God doesn't seem to be front and center in our story tonight, but were you paying attention a few minutes ago when I asked Susan and Adam to make those promises? Did you pay attention to what specifically I asked them? I said to them, *As you bring Samuel to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with these responsibilities: To live with him among God's faithful people, to bring him to the word of God and the holy supper, to teach him the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, to place in his hands the holy scriptures, to nurture him in faith and prayer, so that he may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God has made, and work for justice and peace. Do you promise to help Samuel grow in the Christian faith and life?*

Do you understand what those promises mean? They mean that God is NOT going to be an "Also Starring," God is NOT a "With" or even "Tonight's Special Guest." These are the promises that Susan and Adam made, the same promises that were made on *your* behalf at some point in your life and then you hopefully took them on for yourself at your Confirmation or at your Affirmation of Baptism. It means that God is NOT out on the edges, *Not* out on the peripheries. Rather, they mean that we are called *by our baptism* to live our lives for God. That we are called *by our baptism* to have God as the main player. We are called to have God as our primary story writer, for God to be our director.

So let us indeed live our lives in the manner that Naaman finally figured out, to do as God says, to put God first.

Amen.

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