

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 12, 2006

"The heart has reasons which reason know nothing of."
Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662)

Readings: 2 Kings: 5: 1 – 14
Mark 1: 40 – 45

Hymns: #455 All Creatures...
#522 God When I Came Into This Life
#540 God Be with You Till We Meet Again

No Props Required
©2006 Ray Bagnuolo

In the story of Elisha, Na'aman, Jehoram, and the “little” Israeli maid, there is another character that appears in the twelve verses that follow this morning’s reading. His name is Gehazim, a trusted member of Elisha’s household.

Na’aman, as you recall, a mighty leader in the Assyrian army, is plagued by leprosy. For all his fame and accomplishments, he is unable to overcome this condition. Fortunately for him, in his conquests, he has captured and put into service an Israeli woman as an attendant to his wife.

At one point, this unnamed woman, referred to as a “little maid” says to Na’aman’s wife that there is a prophet in her homeland that could cure her husband of the leprosy from which he suffered.

Word of this possibility travels to Na'aman and his king, who loads Na'aman with a very large sum of riches and sends him to the Israeli king, Jehoram, with a plea for him to cure Na'aman. When Na'aman appears before King Jehoram, the king is taken aback and frightened, tearing his garments, saying how am I to heal this man? Am I God?

It is believed that Jehoram's distress stems from the fact that Israel of the time was under the jurisdiction of Samaria. It is supposed that he believes that if he doesn't heal Na'aman that punishment would surely befall his kingdom.

Then, as if by accident, Jehoram remembers that Elisha, the prophet, lives in Judah – and so he sends Na'aman and his riches to the prophet, who refuses to even see Na'aman, but through an intermediary tells his to go to the River Jordan and dip himself in the river seven times, if he wishes to be cured.

Na'aman is incensed and indignant. He refuses to go, muttering something about the prophet refusing to see him face-to-face, using a servant to send this great and mighty warrior off to bathe in a river. But, at the prodding of his servants, Na'aman does go to the River Jordan and reluctantly follows instructions. And, surely to his amazement, he is healed in a magnificent way.

Our reading this morning stops here, but there is more. Na'aman returns to Elisha after his miraculous healing as a convert to the God

of Israel. He and Elisha meet and Na'aman professes his faithfulness to YHWH as the true God.

Na'aman asks Elisha to please take the gifts he has brought, but the prophet refuses his offerings and he is told simply to go in peace.

Before he leaves, Na'aman asks only one thing: that he might take two loads of soil home with him, so that when he makes his offerings to YHWH they may be done on the soil Israel.

And so Na'aman leaves.

Enter Gehazim.

Gehazim, a trusted servant of Elisha is overcome by the glitter of all the wealth offered by Na'aman and turned down by his master. A short time after Na'aman leaves, Gehazim runs after Na'aman and his chariot, fabricating a story that Elisha needs a small portion of the fortune for an unexpected situation. Na'aman gives Gehazim twice what he asks for, and Gehazim returns home, only to be confronted by Elisha. Gehazim's greed and avarice, cause him to be cursed by Elisha with the same condition of leprosy from which Na'aman had been healed – and the narrative ends here, with these words of Elisha to Gehazim:

"The leprosy therefore of Na'aman shall cleave to you, and your descendants forever." So he (Gehazim) went out from [Elisha's] presence a leper, as white as snow.

This is a story about the Power of YHWH: Jehoram couldn't heal the leper; Elisha himself couldn't heal the leper – it was the power of God through Elisha's instructions that healed Na'aman. A powerful story, indeed, but I am struck by the role of the minor characters, the Israeli maid who has no name and Gehazim, the trusted servant of Elisha.

It is the Israeli woman, captured, put into service away from home that has the faith. It is she who knows the God of Israel, who believes in her God from afar, even though she has fallen captive. And, in the irony of the narrative, the one closest to the prophet, Gehazim, living in the prophet's household – loses himself to the allure and his greed for worldly possessions.

So here we have this grand landscape of Samaria, Judah and the tale of a desert journey that includes heroes of military magnitude, two kings, riches, prophets, and the mighty River Jordan – the setting is immense, the stage is set, the props are all in place. Yet, it is the simplest of characters, a character with no name, a slave, basically, whose faithful heart points to the glory of God through her simple statement of faith to the warrior's wife.

Simplicity – another word, I believe, for elegance.

I think I learned this as a kid. When I was about 10, maybe younger, I had one of those crystal transistor radios we used to make. It was so simple and amazing in the power it had – this small little electrical bit

of wiring that made it possible to sit and listen to something that came seemingly out of nowhere. As amazed as I am at the incredible powerful and complex demonstrations of technology that we have today, I am still awed by how simple and inspiring that discrete bit of electronics was to me as a kid and still as an adult today.

Another story, much later – in my forties, along the intercoastal waterways of Fort Lauderdale. I sat, one day, in a small park reading; beautiful houses all around; huge sailing crafts on their way to the ocean, when suddenly –out of nowhere, an aphid – one of those smallest of insects landed on the back of my hand.

Truly a lovely little resplendent green critter, and as I held it up close to my eyes to marvel at its design – in the background - one of the most beautiful of yachts cruised by.

There I was, bright sun-shining day, glorious blue sky, holding the aphid closely to my face, yacht in the background – and suddenly I was struck by the thought that no matter how great and complex that sailing ship was, however skillful the hands and minds of those who put it all together – they could never make one of these little aphids! An insect humbled all of human power, intellect, and might! Simplicity, elegance, humility at its best, I thought!

And so is the simplicity of truth about Jesus elegant and humbling. In the New Testament story of Mark, probably composed of two or more stories, compressed as Mark likes to do, we have Jesus almost being

challenged, according to some, by the leper: "If you will," translated as – "If you can, heal me."

And Jesus says something to the effect: "I can and I choose to..." and reaches out and touches the man, who is then healed of his leprosy (of whatever form it may have been). Touch, compassion, power. A healing through the simplest of demonstrations: touch.

Do you know, I can still "feel" the touch of that crystal radio; I can still feel the touch of that aphid alighting upon my hand.

No great landscapes, no kings, journeys, deserts, servants, or riches: Jesus and his touch. What could be more elegant, more human, more divine?

The stories of today's readings remind us of the power of God in the great blanket of a major snowfall, but even more so in the power of one flake, repeated over and again.

Jesus told the cured leper to present himself to the priests at the temple to document the healing, as was the custom. He told him, too, to tell no one else of his cure. Well, in his exuberant disobedience, he could scarcely remain quiet. And word of the healing upon the ears of those in need; like one flake upon another, well, the word spread into a blizzard of outreach and cries for healing.

So much so that Jesus' plans for moving on to Capernaum, according to Mark, were most likely delayed while he healed and ministered to the sick.

This morning, one simple flake of snow upon the other changed many of our plans. Over 2600 years ago, the Israeli maid changed the course of Na'aman's life and faithfulness with her simple words sending him on a visit to Jehoram and Elisha; and in the time of Jesus, his simple touch set into motion our lives together today. It's that simple.

Safe to say that many of us have grandscapes of one kind or another, major plans and projects that surely produce many good things. However, we all know the power, the healing and elegant power of "the touch" – a few words, an embrace, a pat on the shoulder, a prayer on our lips for another – the touch that requires no stage or setting to put into motion the greatest story of all – the power of God in our lives – not 2600, 2000, or 15 years ago – but today.

May we all feel the touch that heals us and pass it on freely as it has been given to us to one another, and another, and another...

Amen.