

**Our First Reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark**

**1:35-45. This is a little bit longer of a reading than I what I originally put in the bulletin. Listen now for the Word of the Lord...**

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

**Anthem**

**Our Second Reading comes from 2 Kings 5, verses 1-14. Now Second Kings is the continuation of what was historically one very large literary piece that covered much of the scope of Israel's history, but was eventually divided up during the middle ages. Now, if you combine 1 and 2 Samuel with 1 and 2 Kings you will recover most of that continuous history, which tracks the origin and development of Israel's becoming a Monarchy. It begins with Saul and David in the Book of Samuel, picking up with Solomon in First Kings, following through the division of the Nation into a Northern and a Southern Kingdom, somewhere in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC, to the eventual fall of the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, to Assyria in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and the fall of the Southern Kingdom, called Judah, to Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Altogether, it is a good 500 year history of the rise and fall of the sovereign nation of Israel. After that point, it will rarely stand on its own without some larger power ultimately having control, such as Rome in Jesus' time.**

**Now in this reading today, we are somewhere in that Divided History of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms roughly in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC, with the focus at this point on the prophet Elisha, who had succeeded Elijah as prophet in Israel. This time period, as I said, is after the division of the two**

**Kingdoms but before the fall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) to Assyria, which will take place in the following century.**

**At this particular time in our text, there was a neighboring nation known as A-Ram, they were a not-so-large nation that bordered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and was located about where Damascus, Syria is located today. A-ram and Israel were traditional enemies, who only came together to fight against greater powers like Assyria, who would soon wipe both of them off the map, so the relationship between A-ram and Israel was complicated, sort of back and forth based on who was strong and who was weak at the moment: sometimes collegial, sometimes tense, and sometimes at war.**

**So as our story picks up today, be aware of this complicated relationship between the two peoples. Listen now for the Word of the Lord:**

“Naaman commander of the army of the king of A-ram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord (or Israel’s YAHWEH) had given victory to A-ram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. (The girl) said to her mistress,

'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told HIS lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of A-ram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, '***Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.***'

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' So Naaman came **with his horses and chariots**, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, '***I thought that for me he 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! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?*** He turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants approached and said to him, ‘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”?’

So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.”

**This is the Word of the Lord....thanks be to God.**

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Healing is a complex thing. Or, at least in this story it seems to be. We have this character Naaman, who seems bent on healing, and apparently is willing to go to whatever lengths he can in order to attain it. Even to the point of traveling to a neighboring nation, with what is probably an uneasy alliance, and presenting himself to their King based on the advice of a young, servant girl.

**Naaman is following a hunch.** He is not, at this point in the narrative, a follower of the God of Israel, even though it is this God who has given him his advanced status of “mighty warrior”. But I can only imagine that if you have or do suffer

from any sort of long-term illness you can relate to Naaman's passion and willingness to follow even the slightest hunch. ***Healing, in times of extended illness, can be desperate business.***

Naaman's story of going to great lengths to be healed is a common narrative throughout scripture, just think of all the different characters in the Gospel's who went to such lengths to seek out Jesus, even one who snuck in to touch the hem of his robe to receive her healing from a long term hemorrhage. Think too about the crowds that would swarm Jesus after those he had healed began spreading the Word about him, just as we heard in our reading from Mark today. We often think of Jesus as feeding the multitudes and of his great teaching, but it was his healing powers that ultimately attracted the crowds that followed him everywhere. ***They too were desperate for healing.***

***So the Story of "God with us" in the world truly is the story of the Great Physician who came to heal the lame, the blind, the sick, and the lepers.***

Now, today we have modern medicine. And often, it can cure us, as some in this congregation can attest to, or reduce our suffering or our symptoms, it can correct vision, eradicate bacteria in our body, and hold off viruses or keep our bodies alive long enough for them to eradicate viruses on their own. But this was

not the case for the ancients. Suffering from illness usually meant NO cure. So we can see in these ancient stories that healing was of EXTREMELY HIGH VALUE. And to attain it, people, like Naamun, would follow any hunch, pay any price, present themselves before foreign political powers, and follow instructions from unseen religious zealots to attain it. **Even if, in the process, they, like Naamun, rail against the very ones who want to offer them healing.** So that is Naamun's story...a tale of one healing.

So, let's turn now to our reading from Mark. And here we have a different character altogether. This is not someone who has power; this is not someone who is mighty. This is a leper in the heart of Israel. And a leper in this situation is not only suffering from a life-long and debilitating illness, but is also a social outcast: considered unclean by Jewish law and therefore an *untouchable* by their worlds' standards. ***A cast off, who lives with all the other cast offs on the fringes of society.***

And along comes Jesus, making his presence and his ministry known. He is, at this point, moving along the fringes of society, gathering disciples, casting out demons, and healing those who come to him. He did not begin his ministry in the cultural or religious centers of the major cities; instead "God with us" began

his ministry, of spreading the gospel, among the outsiders and even among the outcasts.

And, then, just like Naaman, we have an individual, a leper, who is desperate, following a hunch, reacting, most likely, to the gossip that this Jesus guy has amazing power and is a prophet from God. But unlike Naaman, he does not test God; he does not make his healing process difficult or complicated by his own arrogance. Instead, we find him humble and on his knees begging Jesus to heal him. Then, with complete Faith and trust in Jesus' power, he says "if you choose to I KNOW that you can make me clean."

**And how does Jesus react...**with compassion, a word in the Greek that literally means to feel your insides move. ***And he stretches out his hand and touches this untouchable person, this cast off of society, who was left for dead in the wilderness, most likely by his family, his community, and definitely by his religion, and his nation. Jesus Says, "I do choose...be made clean."*** That is the lepers story.

Two lepers...two stories of miraculous healing: One a strong, powerful, and rich man...who is so desperate, he will follow the advice of slave girls and his own servants and, in the end, is finally willing to humble himself by sitting down in his enemy's river to receive healing from a God he does not even believe in. The

other an outcast of society, an untouchable, who in complete humility goes straight to his knees to beg the Great Physician. And it is this outcast, who looks desperately but confidently at Jesus, with a faith that is so admired we still read about it 2,000 years later.

Two desperately ill people... on either end of the spectrum both wanting the same thing...to be made whole again. To be made whole both, in their bodies, and in the eyes of their society. ***And, God graciously offers healing to both.***

Friends, we are, in this country, in the midst of a horrendously divisive debate about the availability of healthcare, and its not going away. It is playing out to be one of the key factors in the upcoming election season, and you are about to hear differing groups of Christian men and women, who are serving in or running for political office, ***tear this issue completely a part.***

But here are the realities. We have, in this country, technologies that can cure. We have technologies that can hold off suffering. We have technologies that can eliminate diseases on multiple levels. We have the capabilities to make lepers clean, to give sight to the blind, and make the lame walk. **And as disciples of Jesus Christ, we have only one choice in how we respond to the needs of the suffering and the sick and the ill in our society**, whether they are strong and powerful like Naaman, who will pay extravagantly for it, or

whether they are weak and voiceless outcasts, who can do nothing but beg.

**And if our two readings of God's Word today are any indication...that sole choice is to find ways TO HEAL THEM, and offer it GRACIOUSLY...to all.**

*In the name of the Father, who is the creator, the Son, who is the great Physician, and the Spirit, who sustains us all by undeserved favor. Amen.*

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**AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (from the Heidelberg Catechism, Question #1):**

**Our only comfort in life and in death is that we are not our own but belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Who has fully paid for our sins with his precious blood and has set us free from the tyranny of evil. He watches over us in such a way that not a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our Father in heaven: in fact, all things work together for our salvation. Because we belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures us of eternal life and makes us wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. Amen.**