

EPIPHANY 6
February 15, 2009

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; (1 Cor 9:24-27); Mark 1:40-45

Let us pray: Lord, open our ears that we may hear your word and our hearts that we may receive it. AMEN

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Psalm 30:2: "O Lord my God, I cried out to you and you restored me to health."

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This morning, we've heard two stories about healing – the first of Naaman, a Syrian, by the prophet Elisha and the second of an insignificant, un-named Israelite, by Jesus. Both are concerned with the healing of lepers, although it's possible that both men were suffering from a different skin disease. Both men are healed, but their attitudes towards their healers and how their healings are accomplished are very different.

Naaman has a preconceived expectation of how he thinks he should be treated and of how his healing should be carried out. He becomes so angry when things don't happen the way he thinks they should, that he almost misses the opportunity to be healed. The leper in Mark's story, on the other hand, comes to Jesus humbly and leaves it up to Jesus to determine whether or not he heals him. I wonder how you and I react when we seek God's help for a particular problem? Do we, like Naaman, have things all planned out? Do we come with expectations and demands, or do we fall on our knees and trust God completely?

Let's look a little further at these two stories. Naaman, we're told, was the Commander of the army of the King of Aram, or Syria. He was a mighty warrior and was held in high regard by his master, especially because, on the battlefield, he'd been responsible for the death of the king of Israel, which meant victory for the Syrians. In the

larger context, it also signified a victory for Baal, the god of the Syrians, over Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. It was believed by the Syrians that this victory had been a result of Divine intervention. You can imagine, then, the high regard in which Naaman was held, the special clothing he may have worn to denote his rank and the servants who were at his beck and call. Unfortunately, riches and special clothing hid a sick man. Naaman, so we're told, suffered from leprosy.

Leprosy, in biblical times, was the name given to a number of skin diseases, such as psoriasis and ring worm, as well as to leprosy itself. Also known as Hansen's disease, leprosy is caused by mycobacterium leprae. It's a disease that's still possible to contract today, and, according to a report presented to the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in December of 2008, approximately 150 cases are still diagnosed in the U.S. every year. There are several different strains of the disease, but most of them result in nerve damage. Without treatment, people with leprosy are visibly disfigured, to the extent that they may lose all human appearance and have significant disabilities. Since, until recently, the disease was also thought to be highly contagious, lepers were understandably feared, shunned and isolated in colonies outside of their villages. The Israelite cleanliness code considered them unclean and mandated that they wear torn clothes, have bared heads and announce to the world their presence by shouting "unclean, unclean" wherever they went. If ever a leper was cured – and true leprosy was incurable – he had to undergo a complicated ceremony of cleansing and restoration. If you're interested in exploring this further, Chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus go into great detail about the lengthy 8-day ritual that needed to take place for a leper to be declared clean.

Naaman, being a Syrian, wasn't subject to such a code. He therefore wasn't isolated or shunned. His disfigurement, however, didn't go unnoticed. A young Israelite servant girl, who attended the King's wife, was aware of it and it was she who suggested that Naaman might be cured, if only he could see the prophet in Israel. The King is willing to let Naaman make the trip. Naaman duly takes with him a letter from his master to the new King of Israel, requesting that his servant be cured. He also takes money and clothing in payment. The King of Israel, on reading the letter, is distraught. He knows that he's unable to cure Naaman and thinks that the King of Syria is trying to pick a quarrel with him. However, Elisha, the prophet, hears this story and sends a message to the King, suggesting that Naaman be sent to see him. So off Naaman goes, along with his horses, chariots and whole entourage of servants and stops outside Elisha's house. Elisha doesn't come out to greet Naaman in person, but instead sends a messenger to tell Naaman what he must do to become healed. Naaman is outraged. First of all, the prophet doesn't give him the respect he feels is his due, and secondly doesn't heal him with the kind of ceremony that he expected. Not only does Elisha not come out personally to greet Naaman, he suggests that Naaman wash in the River Jordan – a river in Israel, no less – rather than in what he thinks are the superior waters of his home land. He feels offended and belittled by Yahweh's prophet, and is about to return home unhealed. Fortunately, for him, his servants are not so hot-headed. They persuade their Commander to do as Elisha suggests. Naaman finally agrees, bathes in the river Jordan and lo and behold, his skin, we are told, is "restored like the flesh of a young boy" and he is healed.

Let's turn now to Mark's story that we just heard in the Gospel reading. In the first place, the leper breaks the law by going to Jesus and speaking to him, but he goes humbly, trusting and kneels before Jesus. "If you choose, you can make me clean", he says. We're told that Jesus was "moved with pity to the depths of his being". He met the man's desperation with an understanding compassion, stretched out his hand, touched the unclean man (which was against the law) and healed him. Jesus doesn't totally ignore the law, however. Rather, he sends the leper off with the injunction not to tell anyone until he's followed the established cleansing ritual and presented himself to the priest for confirmation of his healing. Jesus doesn't want to prejudice the man being declared clean because of any bias against Jesus by the priest, should he learn that Jesus is the healer. Our leper, however, is also disobedient. Before going to the priest, he tells everyone in sight of his healing, with the result that Jesus' ministry itself is compromised.

We have two different healing stories; two different approaches to the one who is to heal; two different reactions to the healer and two different methods of healing. How might these two stories affect us today? What can we learn from them? Some questions we might ask ourselves are: Do I, like Naaman, pre-plan how I expect God to respond to my needs or to my cries for help? How do I react when my expectations are not met in the way I think they should be met?

I'm reminded of a well-known story, which many of you probably remember. Floods come to the Mid-West and a young man – a Christian believer – is trapped in his house by the rising waters of the Mississippi River. Although he moves from floor to floor and eventually to the roof, he turns down, with thanks, offers of rescue from a passing boat and a helicopter, believing that God has special plans to rescue him.

However, the waters keep rising and sadly, the young man drowns. When he arrives at the pearly gates, feeling somewhat angry, and let down, he asks God why He didn't rescue him. God says "What do you mean? – didn't rescue you? Who do you think sent a row boat and a helicopter? Of course I sent help to you. Why didn't you take advantage of my help?" The young man missed God's help because he had his own idea of how God was going to save him.

I'm also reminded of an experience of my own when God responded in an unexpected way. A few years ago, just before the beginning of Lent, I prayed that I could have a closer relationship with God. I envisaged that this would occur through prayer, meditation and reading. Instead, less than a week into Lent, my husband was involved in a serious car accident, which involved hospitalizations, multiple surgeries and a long period of therapy. That wasn't the way I'd thought I'd develop a closer relationship with God – but, believe me, it happened – but, the wonderful thing was, it didn't happen just for me. It happened for my husband and my daughter as well. I'm not saying that God caused the accident, simply that He used it for His purposes.

Another question I might ask is: What's my attitude when God doesn't seem to be responding at all? Do I, like Naaman, become angry? – have a pity-party and decide that God doesn't care about me; perhaps that I've done something to offend God? - think that I haven't prayed hard or long enough? Do I think that God doesn't know what He's doing and become impatient with waiting for God to act? I've heard and seen all of these responses from sick patients whom I've visited at the hospital. Most frequently, patients wonder what sin they may have committed in order for God to have made them sick. Other times, they feel too insignificant for God to pay any attention to their needs, and

other times they're just plain angry – the “why me?” syndrome. All of these responses are understandable, but can be indicative of a lack of understanding of God's love for each one of us and also of the mysterious ways in which God works. So often, we think that we know best – but – we don't usually see the big picture. We don't appreciate that God may have something far more wonderful in store for us than we can possibly imagine, as was the case in my own experience. We don't think that something else may need to occur before our needs can be met. God's timing is often different from ours. God's sense of our needs is often different from our own and sometimes God responds and heals in ways that we don't initially recognize.

We don't always recognize God at work for all sorts of reasons. Naaman, for instance, was so wrapped up in his own self-importance and thoughts of how someone in his position ought to be treated that he couldn't, in his anger, initially accept Elisha's curative treatment. His disobedience almost resulted in an opportunity for healing being lost. Mark's leper, on the other hand, was not only humble, he was smart. He knew what he wanted to have happen, but he left it up to Jesus to make the decision. “If you choose, you can make me clean”, he says. He didn't have expectations as to how Jesus would heal him or even if he would, but he had the faith and trust that Jesus could. Are we able, in our daily living, to trust Jesus fully - to say “Lord, your will be done” and really mean it? It's a struggle for most of us as we seek to do God's will.

Some other questions that these stories raise for me are: What's Jesus wanting to heal in me today and is there anything that might get in the way of that healing? Might I need to forgive someone, for instance, including myself? Sometimes we might feel unworthy to receive God's healing, or we might think that those stories were about

healings that took place hundreds of years ago and nothing like that could happen today. Some of us might lack faith and trust in God's healing power – that the Holy Spirit can work through God's people here and now. Others might think I'm just fine, thank you very much and I don't need any healing. But, no-one goes through life without gaining emotional scars of one kind or another and we sometimes forget that we might need spiritual or inner healing.

I'm reminded of an experience of a friend of mine – an Englishman, who uprooting himself from his homeland, came to this country with his young American wife. Soon after their arrival here, his bride unexpectedly asked for a divorce. Needless to say, he was devastated. I met him at a Fishnet meeting soon after the divorce was finalized, not knowing any of the above information. He asked me for prayer. When I finished, he told me that he'd had a "mountain-top" experience, and that he'd been transported to the summit of Snowdon, the highest mountain in Wales, where he'd often spent many happy hours climbing in his younger days. He knew he'd received some inner healing from the pain of his divorce.

Jesus healed this man through prayer. He healed the leper through touch and Naaman was healed following Elisha's command to immerse himself in the River Jordan. All of these healings were pretty much instantaneous. Others take a lot longer and others may not be immediately evident. Healing is one of God's mysteries. We don't know why some people receive physical healing and others don't, but we can trust that the healing God has in mind for us is the one that will heal us on the most levels. What we can also do, is to make sure that we don't unwittingly put a barrier in the way to prevent it. We can make sure that we're open to hearing and recognizing God's voice in

many different situations, through many different people and that we're obedient to God's guiding Spirit. I pray that, like the leper, we may come before God humbly, trusting that God will, in his compassion, meet our needs. I pray that we may, with the psalmist, be able to say "O Lord my God, I cried out to you and you restored me to health". AMEN.