

DO you know this reading? It has become one of my favorites. The healing of Naaman is a famous story, not only used for preaching regularly in our time, but quoted by Jesus in his first Sermon at Nazareth, saying: "Now there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was healed save Naaman the Syrian." This was not reference to modern day Syria, but an Old Testament Canaanite enemy of Israel, ruled by King Aram, located just across the Jordan River. The hostility and prejudice between them, all these centuries later, led the people of Jesus' hometown to attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff for comparing Naaman to them more favorably... Please do not do that to the preacher today!

One of the things I love about this story are the juxtapositions. The first person in this story is Naaman, a great and powerful man, probably uniformed, over 6' tall, covered with muscles, military scars, victories. Commander of the enemy King's Army, our equivalent would be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Part of the King's inner circle. Naaman was a force to be reckoned with, who always got his way by power, influence or money. **However, Naaman was afflicted with Leprosy. Wow. What a shift!** This form of Leprosy, was a skin disorder literally causing your flesh to rot off of the bone until fingers or toes drop off. Here is a man filled with Strength, Power, LIFE, with a disease that looks like living death and decay. Where Naaman should have been a man honored and revered; Leprosy caused him to be excluded. Leprosy was deemed to be a curse from God, that not only was the body diseased, but so also the person's soul.

Juxtaposition, not only within the person of Naaman, **BUT IN THE STORY, notice that Naaman is named,** the King Aram is remembered; but there is also an unnamed Queen and her servant, not only unnamed but a slave, captured from Israel in a military raid. She is completely powerless, her life owned by another. Yet this Aide to the King's household, this young girl, offers HOPE: In Israel, across the river Jordan, there is a Prophet Elisha who could cure Naaman's disease. What a wonderful image, with all the power, wealth and authority of the King at his command; this young woman no one knows, speaks truth.

Also **there is the juxtaposition of the two Kings,** Syria at this time has all the power. Naaman's King sends him with a letter to Israel's King (who also here is unnamed); but Israel's King instead of interpreting this as request for a favor, interprets the King of Syria to be demanding the impossible. Even Kings are not God to cure Leprosy, he was provoking a War! YET GOD's prophet sees this differently: "Have this man come, that he will know there is a Prophet of GOD in Israel!" To Elisha, Naaman is not a Commander but a man.

Again there is a juxtaposition, **Naaman has this whole entourage** Battle Horses, Chariots and Troops, carrying over 1,000 pounds of Silver, 500 pounds of pure gold and 10 elaborate Festival Robes as a Prince or Priest might wear. Naaman goes to the hut of the Prophet of GOD: Elisha, in order to PAY to BUY his cure on his terms. There is a reality here, that when we are ill, we want the doctors to prescribe a pill that we can order at CVS or WALLGREENS. We become frustrated when instead of buying a medicine, we are told to lose weight, or get more sleep, or that there is nothing that can be done. But Elisha not only refuses to offer an incantation, provide medicine or ritual, Elisha does not even lower himself to come out to look upon Naaman. All that Elisha the Prophet of God says to the Powerful Naaman, Commander of the Army of the King of Syria, is: **"You need a Bath!" Quite literally, "Go Soak your head!"** And of all places, tells Naaman to bathe in the muddy Jordan river that his horses just walked through, which is the boundary line between their Countries!

To Naaman this is a double insult! He has a skin affliction others have described as a curse, and is told to **take a bath!** But are not the rivers of his own Country cleaner and better than the Jordan? Why does Elisha want him to go down to this boundary between their warring Nations SEVEN Times? To bathe in

the mud and salts of this River running down from the Mountains in the North to the Dead Sea South of Jerusalem.

Reluctantly, Naaman goes down into the Jordan 7 times, and emerges with the skin of a newborn! Now he returns to Elisha, no longer to BUY the Cure, but instead to offer a reward for his gratitude, but still Elisha insists that you cannot buy God's Grace! However **a change has taken place in Naaman**, and he asks for two bags of soil from Israel, so that when he goes in to worship with his King, and the King bows down to worship their gods, Naaman can offer his arm to stead the King, as Naaman stands on soil from the land of Israel.

Working with this story this week, of our Nation's Anniversary, it occurred to me that for at least the last 100 years, **we have described ourselves as a Democracy** or more accurately as a Democratic Republic, and our leaders have attempted to export democracies to different places throughout the world. BUT in truth, our emphasis as a Nation has not been upon being a Democracy, so much as on exporting **Capitalism**. What we Manufacture, Buy and Sell, are what drive our economy, society and culture. The point of all these contrasts, is reminder that what is important, **what truly matters is not Power or Purchasing Power but offering HOPE and FAITH in GOD.**

One last juxtaposition: Naaman had wanted to give all he had to pay for this healing and Elisha insisted that you cannot buy faith in God. The conclusion to the Story of Naaman and Elisha, which we did not read this morning is that Elisha had a servant named Gehazi, and while a servant to the Prophet of GOD, **Gehazi prefers reward over faith**. So when Naaman goes on his way, Gehazi intercepts Naaman. Gehazi creates a story, that just after Naaman left, a traveler came to Elisha, and wanting to provide for this unexpected royal guest Elisha now has sent Gehazi for the 1000 pounds of Silver, the 500 pounds of Gold and the 10 Festival Garments. Naaman is indebted to Elisha, so offers this up as freely as the GRACE that Naaman had received.

But when Gehazi gets back to Elisha's hut, although they had been miles away, Elisha describes God knowing what Gehazi had said and done! To be accountable for his actions, Gehazi not only receives all the Silver and the Gold and the Robes, **but also THE LEPROSY!**