

Outside the Lines

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. 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. She 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 Aram 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 Parpar, 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.

In the movies, you know when the character God is doing some healing—mainly because there is usually choir music in the background, some smoke or fire – or a mist. The person being healed usually lifts up their arms to the heavens, smiling, or crying. It is our cue, as movie watcher, that God's work has been done. It is very convenient, how would we know it was God without all that smoke and music?

Real life is not like that for most of us, not for me anyway. I do have a friend who has a quite dramatic spiritual life – she sees visions of Christ on the cross and has profound moments of healing. She gets answers when she prays.

I'd like to say my initial reaction to her experiences is one of gratefulness that she has such dramatic prayer life, but I would be lying. I am torn between being jealous that she seems to

get results, and relieved that I am not having weird visions from some other realm. I like results with no drama.

So today's reading about Naaman stands out as one of my favorites. Naaman has a big, dramatic life. He is rich, powerful, a favored general. He is sick with leprosy however, and seeks a cure. He comes to the healing with his great wealth – silver, gold, and several garments for payment. He is expecting big things, after all – he is a big man – his healing should be proportionate to his grandness.

Naaman's expectations are dashed. Elisha does not even come out to greet him, just sends a messenger with instructions. Naaman's first thought is not about following those instructions, he's feeling insulted.

*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!*

Naaman wanted more Cecil B. De Mille – some smoke, some hand waving at least – some show business — A big healing from a big God.

Naaman is full of his own status, so distracted by it that he nearly misses being healed at all. God, in this story, is hardly mentioned; God's healing work is accomplished with no fanfare at all, just a bath in a dirty river.

What's more, an Israeli servant points out the work of God. No clouds, no choir, just a reminder to Naaman that yes, these simple instructions can be the work of God.

This is an astounding act of faith in a God that for so long, has been known as only working for Israel, and God's chosen people. This servant knows the God of his people works outside the boundaries of "most favored nation" status.

So many times we hear "God's chosen or God's elect" and believe that the nation of Israel is somehow marked for special favor, or special suffering.

And as we fire up our grills this weekend and attend the various parades and fireworks displays, certainly, there will be some who believe this nation is marked for special favor – "one nation under God" – as if God is on our side, and only our side.

There will be just as many who believe that God has turned its back on us as nation – because of our sinfulness. And that all our bad times, the oil spill, the economy, are proof of God's wrath.

Both sides of the argument have serious expectations of God, a God hemmed in by boundaries.

Like Naaman, we assume that our expectations are the measure of God's ability to work in creation. We judge God's ability by our own markers. We want God to do something for us, in the way we want it done, and on our schedule. We are looking for God, but can't see God - distracted by our own expectations, blinded by them.

Some of us progressive types don't even think that God works at in this world at all. We have not only jettisoned the old white bearded man on the gold throne – but any notion of God at work in the world as well.

I don't pretend to understand God- but I am not quite ready to assign God to the background.

One of the things I like about the UCC's "God is still speaking" campaign is that theme is one of the most prevalent themes in our Christian tradition. We know God colors outside the lines. We know God has no boundaries of nation, gender, race, - or any other line we draw in the sand. But we keep drawing them anyway.

Being a still speaking people means that we, like Naaman's servant, often have to point to the ordinary, simple things of life and say, "God is here." God is here – in something as simple as a ripe tomato on a beautiful summer day – the earth's bounty and the freedom to enjoy it—God is here, in a quiet act of kindness from a stranger. As still speaking people we are called beyond the smoke and music to witness to a God outside the lines.

For Naaman's servant, and for us, being chosen by God does not mean we are set apart from creation, but that we are a people uniquely called to seek and witness to God at work in the world, even when God defies our expectations.

But we can only witness to God when we get clear about where God works, when we can focus our eyes on the possibility that God just might be speaking through people who do not think like us, love like us, look like us, or even vote like us.

For as the story of Naaman teaches us, it is through God's people that God's work is known. It is through the witness of Naaman's wife's servant that Naaman even hears about Elisha, the great healer and prophet. And it is only through the witness of his other servant, that Naaman can get focused and follow the simple instructions to wash, and be healed.

As God's people, we are and we do the work of God, in our neighborhoods, families, and in our national life. Through our very lives, as we love one another, we proclaim, "God is here." And not just here, but everywhere. Even in the very places we cannot comprehend.

Ok, I will admit to having a somewhat dramatic God moment. I was in my room after thyroid surgery and was just starting to wake up. Germaine, my nurse, came in, looked at my chart, and said, "Ms. Hopkins, you are so blessed to have your Doctor, you know he is the best! And God must be looking out for you because your surgery went so well and they got all that

cancer. And you are so blessed that you had the kind of cancer you did, because that surgery did the trick - you are better now.”

This angel of a nurse completely reframed my cancer surgery, Before I had the wits about me to form an expectation about it, or pass judgment, she immediately got me to thinking about how much there was to be thankful for – instead of all the scary thoughts that go with a cancer diagnosis. Did God make sure my surgeon was the best? Did God give me the “right kind” of cancer? Does God fool around in those kinds of details? I don’t know. But here’s what I do know. Her words healed me as surely as God coming in smoke and music. She said, “God is here.” And I was Naaman, standing in the Jordan, clean as a young girl. I felt healed and whole, after some simple loving words from a completely unexpected source.

Driven to distraction by our own expectations of God – we might miss God completely. Driven to distraction by our own boundaries of God, we do worse, we claim God as ineffectual, irrelevant, a distant landlord. Instead of looking for elaborate miracles, angelic choirs and smoky mist, we are called to search for God in every moment of our ordinary lives. Open to where ever God might be working – in whatever people God might be speaking through – we will surely find God. For God is love, and where true love is, God herself is there.