

First Scripture Reading 2 Kings 5.1-19

Second Scripture Reading Mark 9:30-37

Our Old Testament lesson today opens by telling us of Naaman, who was “commander of the army of the king of Aram...a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram”. We are told of this man who is not an Israelite, indeed this is a man from one of the neighboring nations which gave the Israelites so much anxiety. Located in modern day Syria, Aram was right on the northern borders of Israel, one of the many nations that gave the people so much fear about what the future held. It was a frightening time for the Israelites. They were afraid of the wolves which were right on their doorsteps, always ready to devour them. Always ready to swallow up their way of life. So it has always been and so it continues to be to this day.

We continue to live under the threat of wolves, which continue to fill us with so much terror about what the future holds, so much anxiety for a world which every news station tells us is crumbling around us. Our homes are invaded with this message that we should be very afraid of the wolves which are so close, lurking right on the dark edges of our world. We are told all day, every day, that we should be afraid, very very afraid. Whether we are afraid of gang violence in cities, reaching our small communities, or if we are afraid of people who continue to bang the drum for domestic groups with terrifying ideologies, who seem to exist in the nearby shadows. Or we fear what a new election will bring, we fear that the fate of the world hangs in the balance of each new election, we fear what kind of world an election will create. Or we fear the rise of terrorist cells, or Isis, or the US drone strikes, or nations which seem bent on destruction. Whole nations which embody our fears, be it the marching Red armies, or the looming threat of nuclear proliferation to nations led by madmen. We all have these anxieties

which make us fear for our children, what kind of world they will inherit, which make us worry that the world is ready to tear itself apart. For a very long time we have worried about the “them” who we blame for all our problems. There is no shortage of preachers and pastors willing to, even on Sunday morning remind you how terrified you should be of “them”. They have become enslaved to these anxieties. And we as people surrounded by this message, we cannot escape this incredible driving fear, which has consumed and devoured our society, even within our gathered communities.

But for all the fears the Israelites had, it was the neighboring nations which weighed heaviest on the minds of the Israelites. These neighboring nations which were always looming right on their borders, always ready to destroy this tiny divided kingdom. We are even told within this text that Aram had been given victory by the Lord. The only security, the only protection from their fears seems to have abandoned the Israelites. The impregnable wall of protection has abandoned them to become an unstoppable sword against them. The Lord, the steadfast protector, deliverer of this nation too small and weak to stand alone, has not only abandoned them but given victory against them. As the reader we cannot be sure if the author is describing an authentic action by the Lord, or if they are preserving within the text their darkest fear. If the defeats at the hands of Aram, has made them fear that the Lord has turned against them.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we again hear Jesus telling His disciples “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again”. We are then told that the disciples did not understand what he was saying but were afraid to ask Him any questions. In this intimate teaching moment between Jesus and His disciples we are told that after hearing that the Son of Man would be betrayed into

human hands, they were too afraid to ask any questions. In this moment the disciples are so bound by what they are afraid of, that they lose this quiet moment with their teacher, it is drowned out by the fears within their heads. The thought of Jesus being betrayed into human hands caused their deep seeded fears to boil to the surface. The idea of Jesus, who they know is the Messiah, handed over into human hands, sounds like abandonment. It sounds like God has abandoned them, God has not only allowed but decreed that their teacher be given over into human hands. Human hands which torture, human hands which kill. At this point they probably sunk so far into themselves, became so absorbed in their own fears about the world that they missed the entire point of the lesson. They became so consumed by the wolves, the human hands, that they saw ready to grab ahold of Jesus, ready to grab ahold of them, of us even, that they missed the good news. They became so devoured by the fears of the world that they were unable to let the good news break into their lives in that moment. They, like so many of us, needed to hear that Christ would rise again, that the same world that would crucify their savior is the same world that Christ would rise into, the same world where we await Christ's eternal kingdom.

Returning to the story of Naaman, if the defeat of their armies was not frightening enough, the text tells us, "the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife". Not only do they have to fear being subjugated by a foreign nation, given into their human hands by the Lord, but even their children, are taken as slaves. While this brutality is not uncommon for the time, the terror that must have gripped the people is unimaginable, the swift and unsuspected assault on civilians, on children, would today be labeled for the fear it instilled in those targeted, terrorism. This is the backdrop in which we find our story this morning. For all of our deepest fears we can imagine

they face they take. For the Israelites the face of their fear was leprosy. These are the fears which keep us from resurrection proclaimed, the fears which let death be the final word, the despair of a fallen world. It is in this fallen world that the response from the girl comes off as very strange, we have this embodiment of fear for her people, who has enslaved her personally, who is diseased and disfigured. We would imagine that she would take some pleasure from this misfortune, some *schadenfreude*, but that is not what she does here.

Instead this young girl, who is probably just a child, who has seen more horrors than anyone ever should, tells Naaman's wife that the prophet Elisha would heal Naaman of his leprosy. Hearing this, Naaman runs off to his king to tell him about this. The king of Aram, tells him to go into Israel, his power over the nation of Israel is so great that he can just send his marauding commander into the heart of Israel with only a letter. The text goes on to tell us, "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'". Even the king of Israel is not immune to the terror that has gripped his people. He fears that this has all been a trap in order to justify more violence against his people. While he knows that only God can take what is dead and give it life, he is terrified that Naaman and his king will bring death to all the Israelites. So in his terror, in the rage that springs from a man who feels doom closing in on his people, a doom he is powerless to stop, he tears his clothes. In front of this marauding commander the king strips himself down, humbled and pitiful before his foe.

When Elisha, the prophet who became the successor and inheritor of Elijah's prophetic office, heard what the king had done, he sent a message to the king asking, "Why have you torn

your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel". During their defeats and the onslaught by Aram, the Israelites became so mentally and spiritually defeated that they believed God was now siding against them. They were a people broken by defeat, utterly beaten. They were so hopeless, they felt that the "them" was about to consume their people that they even thought that God who created their nation was ready to destroy them. Within Elisha's response is not only the boldness that his people had long since lost, but a no to all the fears of his people. As his people wailed about their impending destruction, Elisha says no, let Naaman see, let the king see, let the people see that there is a prophet in Israel. He says no to their doubt, no to their fears as the final word, no to those who feel that death is upon them. The Lord's presence still resides in Israel. Even when all seems lost and dead, the Lord remains with His people. Even when Christ announces His death, His resurrection will come, His kingdom will come, what is heartbreaking and bitter in this world will not consume our joy. And Elisha says this to his king in the boldness that only the Lord can provide. So Naaman comes, Naaman comes with horses and chariots with all the strength we would expect. Gone is the gold, silver and garments, gone is the carrot, all Naaman brings is the stick. The pack of wolves which terrorized Israel, the fears that we have that exist beyond our sight, are now right on Elisha's doorstep.

And how does Elisha respond? He sends a messenger, while the king of Israel met with him personally, Naaman does not even register a personal response from Elisha. Elisha is not impressed or afraid, he will not be moved by the same fears which grip his king. He sends a messenger to tell him to go and wash in the tiny, dirty Jordan River, not just once or twice, but seven times. Naaman does not like this answer at all, he becomes infuriated and goes away. You can hear within the text just how angry Naaman is, this is an incredibly humanizing moment for

a man who seems more like a monster, the nightmarish figure of an entire monstrous nation. His wealth, position and brute force would not give him the healing he desired, so he is leaving. As he is leaving, he is fuming, he is saying all of the things that he could not think of when he was driven away by his rage. He says “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?”. Naaman begins by lamenting how Elisha, this lowly prophet would not meet with him, the commander who meets with kings. Naaman thought that he, with his horses and chariots would at least get Elisha to come out of his house to wave his hands and call on the name of the Lord to cure him. He thought that his authority would move this prophet and move God. Naaman then begins to focus his jabs not only on this insolent prophet, but on the Jordan River, which is pathetic compared to the rivers of his homeland. This small, disgusting river is not enough, it is not enough to clean him.

The second half of our Gospel lesson this morning, brings to light a similar self-centered focus in the disciples. After pondering their fears during their journey, they returned their thoughts to their place within this community. With God in their presence, these twelve are bickering about which among them is the greatest. This debate makes sense within their context but this is nonsensical when we realize who Christ is for all of them, compared to all of them. With His instruction, Jesus turns their societal norms, their fears about society on their head, he instructs them that in order to be first, they must be last, a servant of all. They must be the child, with the lowest status. Jesus takes their quarreling over status, and redefines it by the created order restored by His death and resurrection. The old answers no longer satisfy, their old fears, no longer guide their lives. They are no longer servants to their fears, they are servants to all.

PAUSE

After Naaman had ridden away, one of his servants turned and said to him, “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’”. Apparently this was all the convincing that Naaman needed, so he went and immersed himself in the River Jordan, as the prophet had told him. And with that, the man whose disfigured body matched the nightmarish portrait of the man who terrorized them and enslaved their children, was restored and made clean. When Naaman stopped focusing on who he was, the man important and powerful enough to be the scourge of a nation, and focused instead on who God is, when he humbled himself before God he was restored and made clean. When we take the focus off all of our fears whether they bear the name Naaman, or Crips, or Isis, or Russia, or even Trump, and focus on the humbling presence of God we can be restored. We can be restored to no longer just be the “us” to their “them” but we can be restored to the created order. We can be restored to the innocent flesh of a child which has not been tarnished by the leprosy which makes us look like the monstrous and inhuman creatures. We can be restored to the community that God intended.

So Naaman returns to Elisha with his full company of soldiers. And now Naaman as one restored stands before Elisha and pronounces “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” Naaman who had come with his wealth and his power now comes before Elisha and calls himself the servant. He knows that there is no power, no God anywhere in all the earth, other than the Lord. Naaman the man powerful enough to get an audience with kings, calls himself the servant five times in these last few verses. And Elisha simply tells Naaman to “Go in peace”. Go in the peace given to you when you offer your fears before the Lord, Go in the peace provided when you let those fears be

washed in the river, humbled and restored under the Lord. Go in peace, in a world restored not by our fears but by the death of Christ. Go in the peace of Christ, which pronounces all of us, servants of all, now and forever. Go in peace, good and faithful servants.