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“The General”

A sermon by Joshua M. Vis

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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2 Kings 5:1-27; Luke 10:1-11, 17-20

Fittingly, one of the principal characters in the Old Testament reading for today is an army general. He is not an Israelite, but an Aramean. Aram is modern day Syria, with Damascus as its chief city both then and now. The unnamed, and rather melodramatic Israelite king in this story is the king of the northern part of the now divided kingdom of Israel. Yehoram is his name and he is the son of the infamous King Ahab. His name, by the way, means “Yahweh is exalted.” Yahweh is the name of the God of Israel, translated as the LORD with a capital L and small caps for the o-r-d in the NRSV. It’s worth noting because Ahab is roundly criticized in Kings. And yet, Ahab gives his son a name in praise of the God of Israel.

Just one more clarification: This story takes place in the Northern Kingdom, which is called Israel. The Southern Kingdom, which plays no part in this story, is called Judah. This can be a bit confusing since the united monarchy under David and his son, Solomon, which precedes the Divided Monarchy of Israel and Judah, is also called Israel. Yet it is the Southern Kingdom of Judah that continues with a Davidic monarchy. Elijah and Elisha do their prophetic work in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. While this story in 2 Kings, along with others, take place in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, ultimately the Davidic monarchy of the Southern Kingdom, called Judah, gets the most attention throughout the biblical record. There is actually a simple explanation for this. It is the tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel that are known as the lost tribes. In 722 BCE, the Assyrian empire conquers Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and relocates most of its population. They never return, as far as we know. While the Southern Kingdom is also conquered in 587 BCE by the Babylonians, not all of its population is exiled. And some of those who are exiled to Babylon do indeed return to Judah. These events are chronicled mainly in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Most of the Old Testament text, we think, comes from members of the Southern Kingdom, Judah,

which explains the preference for Jerusalem, Judah's capital, and the Davidic monarchy. This also helps explain the consistent negative portrayal of the kings of the Northern Kingdom, like the king in our story today.

As we heard last week, Elijah has exited the earthly scene in dramatic fashion and Elisha has taken over his rather tumultuous and miraculous prophetic ministry. This story is a good reminder as to why some first century Jews compared Jesus to Elijah. Elijah and now Elisha prophesy with signs and wonders—healing, raising from the dead, multiplying loaves. It all sounds quite familiar. Jesus actually references the story from 2 Kings that I just read. Luke 4:25-30 reads:

“And Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephat in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

Jesus’ point is pretty clear, though not well received. Jesus reminds his people, the Jewish people, that God is not always partial to the Israelites, later known as Jews. This is somewhat of a minority report in the Old Testament. Much of the Old Testament advocates particularism over universalism; that is, Yahweh, the Lord, has chosen Israel, and Yahweh’s concern for the rest of the world is peripheral. Yet today’s Old Testament passage is part of the minority report. The Lord’s reach goes beyond Israel or Judah. The Jews of Jesus’ time were under the rule of the Romans, and it appears from the passage in Luke that they preferred a nationalistic message. But according to Luke, Jesus is open to a mission that extends beyond the Jews, which is good news for us.

Naaman is “the” general of the Aramean army. Aram is a rival of Israel. We need only look at the second verse of this chapter (“Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel...”) or we can look at the next chapter, chapter 6, to affirm this: 2 Kings 6:8 reads, “Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers...” Israel and Aram often fought for control of northern Transjordan, which is the area east of the Jordan River at its northern-most point.

The first surprise in this story comes right in the first verse. It is here where we are told that Naaman, the Aramean general, “was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him *the LORD had given victory to Aram.*” Why is the LORD, the God of Israel, giving victory to Aram? The text does not say, but let’s keep this little admission in mind as we proceed through the story. You see, one of the hallmarks of Old Testament narratives is their paucity of detail. Compared to Homer, or modern story-telling, the biblical narratives are terse and lack unnecessary detail. Rarely do we get any description of a character’s appearance, thoughts, or feelings. So when a biblical author does include a detail, any detail, we must not miss it or dismiss it. The assumption is, there are no superfluous poetic flourishes in Old Testament narratives. So Naaman has the LORD to thank for his victories on the battlefield.

Naaman has his servants to thank for his eventual healing. The text stated that Naaman was a leper, but this is misleading. The Hebrew term translated here as leprosy is also used to refer to an affliction in a house or on clothing, and thus is not the disfiguring disease we know as leprosy, now called Hansen’s disease. Naaman’s affliction “is considered to be a skin disease that might be caused by mold, mildew, or some other growth.”¹ This makes better sense since Naaman is a successful general with access to the king of Aram. Nonetheless, without the wise counsel of two of his servants, Naaman would not have been healed. The advice of a young Israelite girl, whom the Arameans had taken captive and who served Naaman’s wife, is the impetus for this entire drama. She notes that if Naaman “went before the prophet who is in Samaria,” he would cure him. Samaria is the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Again, let’s note that this advice comes from “a young girl.” Without a doubt, there can be no greater contrast between this young, in the Hebrew literally “small”, captive servant girl, and Naaman, whom we are told is a “great”, in Hebrew literally “large,” man.

The reaction of the Israelite king to the Aramean king’s request for the healing of Naaman is rather ridiculous. He tears his clothes and suspects that the king of Aram is picking a quarrel with him. To his credit though, the Israelite king does understand his own limitations: “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” Yes, he is the leader of a powerful nation, but he is not God. We all do well to keep that in mind. But he does not appear to know what the young girl who serves Naaman’s wife knows. There is a

¹ Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 298.

prophet in Israel who can heal Naaman, and while some prophets (Isaiah, for example) were a part of the king's inner circle, Elisha is not.

Naaman finally reaches Elisha, but he is not pleased with how things proceed. Elisha has the gall to send a messenger out to Naaman with instructions for his healing. It's pretty fabulous really. Naaman has access to the king of Aram, who gets him access to the king of Israel. Yet, Elisha doesn't even bother to come out and greet this Aramean general. This angers Naaman, and he is set to forgo this adventure altogether when again Naaman takes the advice of his servants.

Naaman's servants make a compelling argument, essentially saying, "Let's at least give this a try." And so the "great man" does what the prophet commands. And, maybe you heard it the first time, but if not listen again: "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." The great man listens to the young girl and receives the flesh of a young boy. Adding to irony, in 5:15 Naaman declares himself the "servant" of Elisha. Because of the wisdom of his servants, Naaman has become Elisha's servant.

Before labeling himself as Elisha's servant, Naaman admits: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel..." Almost. He almost has it right. It's that "in all the earth except in Israel" part that he has wrong. And if we listen carefully to the story we know he is not right. You see, at the beginning we learned that it was Yahweh, the God of Israel, who had given Naaman, the Aramean, success in battle. God's activity is not confined to Israel. Perhaps there is no prophet in all the earth except in Israel, but this story clearly shows that God's work extends beyond the land of Israel.

And this is where things get humorous. Naaman means well. He really does. He asks for some Israelite soil so that he may offer sacrifices to the LORD. Whereas he had denigrated the water of Israel, the water of Jordan, Naaman now wants to take some Israelite soil with him, as if this somehow mattered. He then proceeds to get permission from Elijah to keep up proper worship appearances when with his master, the king of Aram. I love Naaman's rather elaborate explanation of the difficult position he will be put in when he returns to Aram. If I may put it in more modern parlance: "Here's the thing" says Naaman, "my boss is going to make me come with him into the temple to our God, Rimmon, and when he leans on my arm in an attempt to bow down before Rimmon, I may be compelled to bow down as well. Can your God cut me some slack on this?" Elisha simply responds by saying, "Go in peace." This either means, "Fine, don't worry about it," or "You're an idiot. Get out of here." I'm not sure which, really.

Gehazi is the one servant in this story who does not fare well. Just when we think that this is going to be a story in praise of the unseen and lowly among us, Gehazi, a servant of Elisha, fetches the compensation that Elisha so insistently refused. Elisha's prophetic powers allow him to see what Gehazi has done and the story ends with Gehazi, and all his descendents even, cursed to be stricken with Naaman's skin disease. It's a harsh fate. Clearly, Elisha is quite serious about not enriching himself through his prophetic powers. He does not make a show of his powers, much to Naaman's dismay, and he adamantly refuses any compensation.

If I may be so bold, I venture to say that there are currently no Elishas or Elijahs in Israel or anywhere else on earth for that matter. We cannot look for a miraculous healer or soothsayer among us. Elisha is a special case. He can orchestrate healing. He knows what Gehazi has done without having been physically present for the exchange. I say this with some hesitance, as I do not pretend to know with any certainty what God can or will do with me or with any of us. But my experience tells me that it certainly is not my fate to be an Elisha. I dare say the same applies to you. There are some who would accuse me of lacking faith. We do receive reports out of the third world church of healings and other miracles. I cannot say much about that. It may be the experience of some, but it is not something I expect or even seek—which some might say is exactly why I cannot heal.

Today's gospel passage, in fact, would support such criticism. In Luke 10:9 Jesus tells his followers whom he sends out to "cure the sick" who are in the towns they enter. I admit that I have no ready response as to why these followers of Jesus could do such things and I cannot. What I can confidently say to you is this. I see Christ sending out his followers to go and change the world. Like Elisha, Jesus will not have his servants enriching themselves in this work: no purse, no bag, not even sandals. Thus I would submit that we must be very wary of those who get rich off of the gospel.

I am also certain that Jesus' ministry must become our ministry, with the understanding that we are not Jesus or Elisha, and with the understanding that our God is the God of the whole world. While parts of the Old Testament may affirm that God favors Israel, we cannot affirm this message. Thankfully, there are other voices in the Old Testament, like our passage for today. And we heard earlier that Paul writes in Galatians, "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all..." Moreover, the overwhelming message of the New Testament affirms that God loves all the peoples of the earth, even the earth itself. Yes, we have been charged to heal the world; to declare that the kingdom of God has come

near. Hear that again: God's kingdom comes near to us on earth. Jesus has come to earth, and will come again. In the meantime, it is on us. Jesus is in heaven, and Elisha is dead and buried. We are the ones who must prophecy. We must go out into the world and do the work of God. Even if we cannot heal disease, we must do something. And we do not do it for our benefit. There is no guarantee of happiness or wealth; only a sense of purpose, perhaps a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

Thankfully, we are not charged to do it alone. Jesus sends out his followers in pairs. Paul extols the church, the body of Christ. We have each other for guidance. We have our pastors. We have the Bible. We have good minds. We have the Holy Spirit, who guides us in ways unseen and often unknown. But there is no formula, no clear path, no easy answers.

However, I am compelled to say that love is the key, as trite as that sounds. I have been reading a book on the war in Afghanistan by American writer and filmmaker, Sebastian Junger. It is decidedly not trite and it has complicated my understanding of love. Junger was embedded off and on for little over a year with American troops in Afghanistan at an outpost in the Korengal Valley, a harsh and unforgiving place. This book has literally kept me up at night. I have no background with the military or with war, thus I have learned much. At one point, Junger discusses courage, an important trait for the military to understand and instill. He writes the following:

“Combat fog obscures your fate—obscures when and where you might die—and from that unknown is born a desperate bond between the men. That bond is the core experience of combat and the only thing you can absolutely count on. The army might screw you and your girlfriend might dump you and the enemy might kill you, but the shared commitment to safeguard one another's lives is unnegotiable and only deepens with time. The willingness to die for another person is a form of love that even religions fail to inspire, and the experience of it changes a person profoundly. What the Army sociologists...slowly came to understand was that courage *was* love. In war, neither could exist without other, and...in a sense they were just different ways of saying the same thing.”²

Courage is love. As followers of Christ, we are charged to love even our enemies. Thus we must find a courage even greater than that of these soldiers—one that extends our capacity to love beyond our families, our friends, our neighbors, our church community. While we may not be able to heal the sick or even trod on

² Sebastian Junger, *War* (New York: Twelve, 2010), 239.

snakes and scorpions, we can love. And this may actually be the harder task. If we truly live out such radical love, we may find ourselves in some godforsaken places doing some seemingly impossible things. Please Lord, may we find such courage. Amen.