

## **"Along the Journey"**

2 Kings 5:1-14; Ezekiel 17:22-24; Luke 12: 22-27  
July 8, 2018

The Reverend Jeffrey T. Foels  
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

### Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

God, prepare a place for your word in our thoughts.

Find a space for your love in our hearts.

Help us listen from the depths of our spirit.

In your son's name we pray, Amen.

I have begun the work of cleaning out my office. I'm estimating it's going to be like twenty bags of books, and then all the other stuff, too. It was hard, earlier this week, to ask Debbie in the office to start saving paper boxes for me. It was easier, and more fun, to start organizing my files, and especially to see clear evidence of how I've grown and changed since the first times I preached here. My first sermon here was in March 2011, on the ways that God subverts our expectations. I drew on examples that have probably faded somewhat into memory – the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, Red River flooding that spring.

As I was looking through old lesson plans and old sermons, there were several texts that now deeply resonated with me. Perhaps because they were all summer sermons, all from chances I got over the years during these quieter months. Perhaps because they became like old friends, texts that speak into life in changing ways.

The first text that felt like an old friend was this one in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, about this man named Naaman. The very first time I preached this text was in seminary, about facing the unknown. Naaman had something like leprosy, an affliction. Yet he was a Syrian general, a man of power and influence. He was wealthy, with an estate and property. To do all of this in spite of his affliction, his condition, meant that he was a self-made man, had won his own honor over and above the leprosy that by rights should have sidelined him.

Yet despite being an important, self-made man, Naaman was humble, and devout. He listened to an Israelite slave girl belonging to his wife. Listening to her ran against all logic of the time. Syria had just raided Israel, and the Lord had given Syria victory. What good could come of that place? Still, Naaman listened to the slave girl, ready to accept wisdom from all sources, especially as none had yet been able to cure his affliction. He had practiced devotion with dozens of holy men before, perhaps here was the secret to his cure.

So Naaman packed up his people and his gear, and goes on the advice of this kitchen maid to the door of the prophet Elisha, a prophet of Israel, of Yahweh. And when he gets there, the prophet doesn't even greet him.

So there is Naaman. Great, yet humble. Afflicted, yet devoted. There is Naaman, standing at the prophet's gate, in hopeful anticipation. There is Naaman, standing at the prophet's door, feeling dismissed. This prophet had sent a messenger. This prophet couldn't be bothered to look this prayerful and powerful pilgrim in the eye. This prophet had blown him off. Naaman had passed greater rivers, great broad clear

waters, holy sites, prophets of greater renown, and that faith, that this prophet would come – this faith was disappointed, greeted by a messenger.

And through the messenger, this prophet had sent a message that was silly. To wash, in a muddy river. In a defeated land. At the word of a prophet who wouldn't come to the door.

Imagine the disappointment, the way Naaman's expectation is confounded, preparations feeling for naught, faith feeling unrewarded.

There is another, from a few summers ago, the text Phil read a moment ago, from these prophetic words of Ezekiel to the people of Israel. At the time I preached from this text, we were going through pastoral transition, too. Tom and Joann both left as associate pastors within a few months of each other, and I found in these texts an image of keeping the faith, that new life comes. I found reassuring words in the text from Ezekiel. The Lord saying "I myself," and that all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

We have this powerful and lovely image – God will take a young sprig of a topmost branch of cedar, and will plant it, and from there a great tree will grow, a tree that will provide shelter in its branches for all the birds, for all the winged creatures of the world. This lovely image was shared with the Israelites when they were in exile.

The Israelites themselves knew something of being plucked up – they had been removed from their land and brought to Babylon, and they pined for their home. Here, Ezekiel is promising that just as they have been picked up from Israel and brought to Babylon, so will the Lord pick them up anew, plant them back in the land, and that they would be a green tree so great as to be a home for all the world. That even though they were now a dry tree, they would be watered and restored and brought high once more.

Another text that spoke to me today is from the text on our bulletin today, from Luke 12, wherein Jesus tells his followers not to worry. In that morning's sermon from five years ago, I listed a litany of worries, of anxieties, of all our modern concerns – about ourselves, our lives, our society, our bodies. I also quoted from John Calvin in that sermon, something he wrote about anxiety. "Before men decline into old age, even in the very bloom of youth...they are involved in many troubles, and they cannot escape from the cares, weariness, sorrows, fears, griefs, inconveniences, and anxieties to which mortal life is subject." "Amid the uncertainties of life, 'we cannot be otherwise than continuously anxious and disturbed."

Yet that worry that runs counter to the life of faith, gets answered by this text from Jesus:

"He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

What a comfort, when we can feel it deeply. Life is more than food, the body more than clothing. If we cannot add a single hour, then why do we worry about the rest. A deep breath in, a deep exhale, a counter to our worries. Indeed, Jesus here gives us freedom to move toward faith.

In all of these texts, from Naaman standing before the prophet, to the image of the cedar sprig plucked up and planted, to the words of Jesus encouraging us away from worry, in these texts we see things that run counter to the ways we so often live. In these texts, I feel something about faith. About the nature of faith, and moreso, about the ways that faith can fall short, certainly for me.

From Naaman, we can see that sometimes our faith in God shifts to an expectation of God. We have an expectation of how God will work through us. We know what this looks like, we know what to expect. It's like our status quo, just better. All the annoying or dismaying things gone. When we resist change, or when we fixate on the little things, we stand like Naaman. And yet, we have confused that expectation with faith. In so doing we put limits on God, on how we will allow God to act in our lives. We confuse our expectations of God with our faith in God.

Sometimes our expectations of God confuse the story from Ezekiel, of the great Cedar, with its twig planted anew. We think that we are the ones that plant the twig. We look for twigs in our own lives that we can plant and restore, confident in our ability to plant the small thing that will grow into something great. We imagine ourselves able to discern exactly what will grow, and seek out what to plant in that spot. We expect God to reward our faith in the new thing, and yet in such a situation, we have greater faith in ourselves than in God. We have faith in our discernment, our planting, our ability to provide the growth. Instead of faith in God, we place our faith in ourselves.

Sometimes we end up without any expectations on God, indeed, we do not live a sense of faith in God or perhaps even faith in ourselves. We become focused on the worries. About what we wear, or eat, or about our lives. In so doing we replace faith with worry. We assume the worst will happen, that nothing will be right, that nothing will be as it should. Instead of placing expectations on God, we live with expectations of our fears.

So how do we respond in such situations?

For Naaman, we return to him in that climactic moment. He has just been told to wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan, and he is dejected, angry, disappointed. His expectation of God has not been met. He begins to walk away, when his servants plead with 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'? And Naaman did, and his flesh became like that of a young boy, and he was made clean. God acted through the prophet in a way that was true to faith, even as it confounded expectation.

Thinking of the image of the cedar in Ezekiel, we remember that we are not growing the great cedar from the sprig – God is. The sprig and the cedar tell us that God's time is not our time, and that the growth of the kingdom will come on the scale of a sprig growing into a mighty cedar. This is not the work of weeks or months, but of generations. Even now, God will pluck from our mighty cedars and grow new from them in ways we'll never know, and we can share in faith that God will provide for all.

Truly, God is acting in this world. God acts in ways big and small, seen and unseen. God acts through us. God sometimes even acts through our plans. In it all though, God acts, has acted, is acting, will continue to act in and through and sometimes in spite of us. We do not need to carry the burden of redeeming creation, for God is already doing that.

Thinking of those words of Jesus' once more, we are reminded of the power of faith. Faith in a God that is greater than any worry or uncertainty. Faith in a God that is greater than our biggest fears, faith in a God that is greater than even our biggest hopes. A God greater than the church and its people, greater than

this time or this place, yet that knows us more closely than anyone. A God that loves us completely and unconditionally, a God that hopes for us to know the peace of that love, that we are enough. A God that is surrounding us and enveloping us in a love that will never end.

That is the faith of our calling, that is the gift of God to us, that inspires all our worship, all our work, all our love for this world, for our neighbors, for ourselves, and truly, that is the faith that inspires our love of God. Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.