

“Taking God at His Word”

2 Kings 5:1-15; Matthew 8:1-13

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany 2022; January 22, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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The Old Testament and Gospel readings today feature a couple of army officers who needed help. They were also Gentiles, meaning that they were not Jews, descendants of Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the Old Testament reading, there was Naaman. He was the commander of the Syrian army in those days. He was very highly regarded by the King of Syria (2 Kings 5:1). In the Gospel reading there was a centurion. He was an officer in the Roman army, having command of a unit of 100 soldiers. Their stories present examples of taking God at His word. The story of Naaman is also a kind of pattern of Holy Baptism. Naaman had leprosy. The centurion had a servant who was very ill.

Naaman had heard that there was a prophet in Israel. This was Elisha. Naaman figured that the prophet could cure him of his leprosy. So he told the King of Syria about the prophet in Israel. The King of Syria then wrote a letter to the King of Israel. The King of Israel was Jehoram, son of King Ahab.

The King of Syria wrote a letter for the King of Israel and also prepared ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. He sent Naaman to the King of Israel with the letter and these gifts. The letter basically said that the King of Syria was sending Naaman to the King of Israel so the King of Israel could heal Naaman of his leprosy.

This request greatly disturbed the King of Israel and threw him into a panic. It disturbed him because only God could heal Naaman. This disturbed him so much that he “tore his clothes” (2 Kings 5:7). He thought for sure that the King of Syria was looking for some excuse to go to war against Israel (2 Kings 5:7).

But Elisha heard that the King of Israel had torn his clothes. He sent a messenger to the king to ask why he had done that. Then he instructed the king to send Naaman his way. So Naaman came to Elisha. He stood at the door of Elisha’s house with his horses and chariot, and with all those who were accompanying him.

Elisha gave Naaman instructions by means of a messenger for being cured from his leprosy. He told Naaman to wash in the Jordan River seven times, and then he would be cleansed from his leprosy (2 Kings 5:10).

Here is the pattern that foreshadows Holy Baptism. There is water. In this case it was the Jordan River. In Holy Baptism we can use any water. There is the promise to Naaman: your leprosy shall be healed. So it is the water combined with the word of command, “go and wash,” and the word of promise, “you will be healed of your leprosy.” Likewise, Holy Baptism is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word. The command is go and make disciples by baptizing. God’s word is the promise of how baptism is full of the salvation Christ has won for us and the gift of the Spirit.

Naaman was shocked by what Elisha told him and none to pleased. In fact, he was furious. He was thinking that the prophet would surely come out of his house to greet Naaman; that he would stand there in great show and call on the Name of the LORD; that he would wave his hand over the place on Naaman’s skin that was infected with leprosy, and that it would then be healed.

But Elisha did not do any of that.

And then Naaman reasoned. The rivers in Syria are better than this silly Jordan River here

in Israel. I could just as well wash in them and be healed. Why did I come all this way? Why did I trouble my master the King of Syria? He was so sure his reasoning was correct. So he rejected Elisha's instructions and went away in a rage (2 Kings 5:12).

But fortunately, Naaman had wise servants. They basically told Naaman to listen to the prophet of the LORD and follow his instructions. Naaman did so. He went and dipped himself seven times in Jordan. He was healed of the leprosy (2 Kings 5:14). He learned to take God at His word that He had spoken to him through the prophet Elisha.

So we too take Jesus at His word with respect to how he brings the promises of salvation in Him to us in His word and sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Now we turn to the centurion. He came to Jesus for help. He too is an example of taking God at His word. The help he needed was that this servant was very ill. He was lying in bed paralyzed and severely tormented. Jesus said to him: "I will go and heal him" (Mat. 8:7).

This prompted a response from the centurion. He told Jesus that he was not worthy to have Jesus enter under his roof. So, the centurion told Jesus to only say the word, and his servant would be healed (Mat. 8:8). He then proceeded to explain that he too was a man under authority, so that when he tells someone to go somewhere, he goes, and to come to him, he comes, and to a servant do this, and he does it. He believes that Jesus is able to do the same thing with respect to his servant's illness. "Just say the word, Jesus, and it will be done." Jesus says in response that He has not found such faith with anyone in Israel.

The great faith of the centurion that Jesus pointed out was that He trusted Jesus so that he took Jesus at His word. And He believed that Jesus's word would work the salvation he sought because it was Jesus's word. But the remarkable thing was that he was a Roman army officer who had such faith, in contrast to the children of Israel.

The Israelites were supposed to be the "sons" of the kingdom. Jesus thought that they were supposed to believe in God and the Messiah like this, "just say the word and it will be done." Why? Because they have the teaching of Genesis one where it tells us how God created all things. God said, and it was so. Here Jesus speaks with the creative power of God to restore and save, and it is so. And then there is Isaiah 55, where the LORD says, "My word shall not return to me empty but shall accomplish the purpose for which I sent it." Here Jesus speaks and His word accomplishes what it says. And yet, Jesus has not found this faith among the sons of the Kingdom, but has found it in this Roman centurion.

This teaches us that it is not any kind of ancestry, or social standing, or any other human credential, or the fact of identifying with a tradition that suffices in the kingdom of God. Rather, it is the faith that takes God at His word that suffices. This faith is directly tied to Jesus because Jesus speaks God's word as God the son in human flesh appearing. And He speaks God's word through the apostles and prophets.

And so Jesus warned that many who were natural sons of the kingdom of Israel, who did not have such faith, would be displaced from the kingdom by many others who come from all the points of the compass, east and west, who have such faith. Jew and gentile does not matter, but faith which takes Jesus at His word. And the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. And those who come from the four corners of the earth will sit down at the marriage feast of the lamb in His kingdom. Why? Because they have this faith, Jesus, at your word. Those who thought of themselves as the sons of the kingdom will be cast out. Why? Because they do not have this faith.

And so we have this faith: Jesus at your word. In Jesus's word we are taught wisdom regarding right and wrong, where we come from, and our destiny. At His word we are taught the

Gospel of our salvation in Him. At His word He promises His presence and the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit, and the promise of eternal life. At His word He delivers these things to us as His word creates Holy Baptism and the supper of His body and blood in the bread and wine. And taking Jesus at His word by faith we receive Him and the salvation and gifts that He has won for us. And in such faith, we will sit down with Him at the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom that has no end. We thank God for this faith in Jesus. May God the Holy Spirit work this faith in us always. Amen.