NAAMAN TODAY

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
The Third Sunday After Epiphany
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We have before us this morning, in our Old Testament lesson, one of the finer stories ever told. It's altogether worthy of a Homer or a Cervantes or a Dickens. We can imagine it being told again and again as people in ancient Israel gathered around the fire after a hard day's work.

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, -- but he was a leper. From a little Israelite maid, working in his household, Naaman learns of the existence of the prophet Elisha, who could cure his leprosy. At the mention of the name Elisha, the people sitting by the fire listen all the more, for Elisha was a great prophet of their God. What will Elisha do when he finally meets Naaman?

The scene shifts to the court of the King of Israel, who at that time was probably a very anxious neighbor of powerful Syria. The Syrian commander arrives, with ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten festal garments. He hands the king of Israel a letter from the king of Syria. The king of Israel has the letter read. "When this letter reaches you," it says, "know that I have sent you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of leprosy." We can think of the Israelite monarch nodding graciously, and then retiring to his chamber with his ministers. There he throws up his hands and tears at his clothes. "Am I god," he says, "to kill and make alive, that the king of Syria sends word to me to cure a man of leprosy? You know what he's really up to, -- he wants to provoke an incident." The king of Israel is an astute student of politics.

Enter the prophet of the Lord, Elisha. "Why are you so upset," he says to the king. "Let me handle this, so that Naaman may know that there's a prophet in Israel." The king agrees. He has little choice to do anything else. The necessary arrangements are made, and Naaman's glittering entourage begins to make its way to the dwelling of Elisha. As Naaman arrives, Elisha sends out a messenger who says to Naaman: "Go wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

At this, the eminent commander-in-chief of the Syrian army turns around abruptly. As he strides indignantly to his chariot he says to his servants, "Surely that so-called prophet should have come out and stood before me, and called on the name of his God, and waved his hand over me, and healed me. Surely. And then that ridiculous advice to bathe in the Jordan! That slimy Israelite creek! Why I could have stayed home and washed in the beautifully clean waters of Damascus. To come all this way for <u>that</u>!" Even so, his servants convince him to do what the prophet said. And, as it turns out, his flesh is restored like the flesh of a little child, and he is clean.

Then come the words that tie the story together for the people sitting by the fire. Naaman returns to the man of God, he and all his company, and he says: "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel."

Now this story is placed before us not only for our entertainment, but also for our edification. So I propose to update it considerably, taking only those liberties with its themes that a fine story allows.

Part One of the story concerns the life of our modern Naaman. More often than not, he has a place of prestige in our society. He may have been accepted by one of the better colleges or universities in the nation, and may have achieved some status at such a school; so that he knows that, intellectually and culturally, he ranks in the higher echelons of the nation. Or, our modern Naaman may be a teacher or an advisor in a strategic place in the great university city so prominent in our society. He knows that his position in this city gives him a status which is respected and admired by many across the country.

That is the shiny outer life of our modern Naaman. You might want to add a classy sports car or an exciting ski-trip or a properly cultural charter flight to England for the vacation. Such garnishes are sometimes a part of the shiny outer life. But our modern Naaman also has an inner life, of which he himself is sometimes painfully aware. He sometimes wonders about the shine of his grades or his publications or his ski-trips. He sometimes wonders about the whole point of being in the top echelons of such a troubled nation. Indeed, to himself, he sometimes even wonders about the whole point of being. And in the process of wondering there come times when he feels very much alone. He wants to keep the external appearances. He wants to play the shiny role. But that isolates his inner life. That makes him depend more and more on his own psyche. This is the man in the lonely crowd, who also exists in university city.

His existential strategy, then, becomes more and more to probe the depths of his own self. In an article some years ago, an author of some renown spoke for a number of his fellow novelists in declaring: "since contemporary life had become at once grotesque and unreal, the only subject matter remaining to the writer -- the one thing whose motions and urgings he could trust and take hold of -- was his own personal self." Likewise in university city, notwithstanding his shiny exterior life, Naaman finds himself more and more probing the depths of his own self. He imbibes "acid" to expand his consciousness. He studies Yoga. He tries to learn about "transcendental meditation" from a traveling Guru. He sits for hours, sometimes months, with a physician whose profession it is to help him drag out deep and forgotten memories from the bottom of his soul. He travels within, often as far as he can possibly go.

Sometimes, I should add, that inner journey can be distressing. It can open up wounds or disclose wounds. This is the pathos of a poem by Theodore Roethke:

I dream of journeys repeatedly:
Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
A fine snow ticking the windshield,
Alternate snow and sleet, no oncoming traffic,
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,
The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,
Ending at last in a hopeless sandrut,
Where the car stalls,
Churning in a snowdrift
Until the headlights darken.

That is one chronicle of Naaman's loneliness and his search for deeper levels of meaning within himself.

Part Two of the story begins when our modern Naaman hears about the Church, or remembers the Church. Sometimes his expectations are aroused. I think that this is happening today more than we sometimes realize. We are through the dreary days of the Death of God theology.

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We have said <u>that</u>, as perhaps it had to be said. Now we can look at religion once again. At least that's the way a significant number of people outside the Church seem to feel. They are raising religious questions and seeking religious answers with a new seriousness. Not all these people turn to the Church, but some do. Such a person has the name Naaman.

Naaman thinks perhaps of the grandeur of the Church in years gone by, -- the mysticism of the basilica, the power of the romanesque, the soaring intellectual heights of the gothic, the passion of the Baroque. The Church seems to offer something which Naaman needs. It seems to offer a relation to God and a Divine therapy, which will do what Naaman's self-searching does not seem to do: enliven his inner bleakness, heal his inner wounds. So Naaman turns to the Church.

But, so the story goes, when he gets there on Sunday morning he's frustrated. He had expected to enter into some exotic rite, encounter some priest who would extend his hand, utter an incantation to his God, and heal Naaman's wounds. Instead, after a rather ordinary worship service, he meets some prosaic looking fellow who asks him to come into the Alumni Room -- for coffee. "I mean! After all!", Naaman says to himself. "Here I come all this way over here for <u>this</u>? ...For a cup of coffee and some coffee-clatching?! Why, I'm sure, I can even get really good coffee back home!"

Nevertheless, there's a rationale here, just as there probably was some rationale, not understood by us now, for the first Naaman to bathe in the muddy Jordan. There's a rationale here, and I think we can see it this way, by raising this question: how do we enter into communion with God? That is the goal of the religious life. How do we achieve it?

That creative Christian thinker of the 19th century, Søren Kierkegaard, had an attractive answer which is still influential in the Church today. He said a person must stand radically alone, and in his aloneness find God. One of the ramifications of this in Kierkegaard's own life, very serious for him, was his decision to break off his relationship with his fiancee. This was a kind of existentialist return to monasticism. In our own day, an equally creative Jewish thinker, Martin Buber, has severely criticized Kierkegaard at this point, from the perspective of biblical thinking. As Buber points out, the Great Commandment of Jesus <u>unites</u> love of God and love of man. And as Buber suggests, rightly, from the perspective of the New Testament, -- one cannot find God without finding one's neighbor.

This notion, I think it's worth saying, is strongly embedded in the Lutheran tradition. (I like to say something good about Lutheranism every now and then.) It's evident most dramatically in the decision of a monk to leave the monastery and, later, to get married. That was a profoundly religious and a profoundly biblical venture. That was the proclamation, in deed, that God is not found in the monastic cell first of all, in isolation, but first of all in a relation of mutuality with another person.

This theme appears in Lutheran doctrine, too. According to Luther, God is <u>really present</u> in Christ, not only in the regular worship of the Church, in the preaching and in the sacraments. God is also really present in Christ in what Luther calls the "mutual consolation of the brethren." Now this mutual consolation is something, I take it, which has a little more depth than coffee-clatching. But I don't think that it's all that different. And surely, having a friendly conversation over coffee can be the beginning of what Luther is thinking about when he speaks of the mutual consolation of the brethren.

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That is the rationale, then. That a person comes into communion with God and finds the therapy of the Divine presence, not by heightening or deepening his individual aloneness, but by coming into communion with other responsive human beings. As Buber suggests, we can say "God," only when we also say "I and Thou."

So I am saying to you, Naaman, as you find yourself alone with your own thoughts in a shiny world which sometimes can seem grotesque and unreal, -- I am saying to you that you should drink seven cups of our muddy coffee. That's the way the healing you seek will begin.