

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

GOD OF THE SLAVE GIRL

2 Kings 5:1-14 [15-19a]

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Analysis by Chris Repp

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6He 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." 7When 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." 8But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 11But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "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! 12Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. 13But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, 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'?" 14So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

[15Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." 16But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. 17Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. 18But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." 19He said to him, "Go in peace."]

Note: It seems to me that verses 15-19a, not included in the lectionary, are necessary to fully make sense of this episode. Naaman is not only cleansed of his leprosy, but comes to realize

who God is. Has his faith not made him truly well?

DIAGNOSIS: Consuming Sickness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *A Fly in the Ointment*

The rich and famous have it all, lives that the rest of us envy. Their wealth makes them independent, free to do as they please. Their fame gets them access to the halls of power, not to mention tables in the best restaurants. We want to be like them and have what they have. But there are some things that even all the wealth, fame, and power in the world cannot influence. For actors and actresses in Hollywood, it's the inevitability of aging.

In the text before us, it is Naaman the army commander who has it all. Success in battle, the favor of his king, and the respect of his compatriots have made him an elite member of the chariot set. There's just one little thing – that pesky skin condition he has, about which nothing, apparently, can be done.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Trust Misplaced*

A recent fad among Hollywood elites is the injection of Human Growth Hormone (HGH) to combat the effects of aging. They claim that it makes them look and feel younger, a claim that has yet to be substantiated. But studies suggest that it may also give them increased risk of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. Whatever the truth about its benefits, at best it only delays the inevitable.

When Naaman hears from his slave girl that a sure-thing remedy for his condition can be found in the land of Israel, he musters all the resources at his disposal: money, fashion, and political connections. He sets off with his chariot-set entourage straight

to the seat of Israel's power. International diplomacy will surely gain a man of his stature the cure he desires.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *At the Mercy of a Slave Girl's God*

Michael Jackson is only the latest illustration of the futility of our cultural obsession with youth and the latest fad drugs. Money, fame, and influence prove ultimately useless, and sometimes only hasten the inevitable.

Naaman, too, finds that all the advantages he has relied on have proven unreliable. Israel's king is at a loss, providing only a belated reference to a nobody "prophet" who won't even grant him the courtesy of a personal audience. He won't accept payment, he won't perform any sort of religious or magical ritual, but impudently sends the commander to bathe in a muddy stream. Naaman's flesh has been consumed by leprosy, and now his heart is consumed by rage. How has it come to this, that the tale of a simple slave girl has led him to humiliation and despair? Does it cross his mind that the "prophet" might be exacting an elaborate, cruel revenge at the bidding of the slave girl's God?

PROGNOSIS: Sickness Consumed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Mercy of a Slave Girl's God*

But the God whose motives Naaman could question is the very same God who allows his flesh to be consumed—not by leprosy, but by the sin that cannot be washed away—in the person of his Son Jesus. This is the God about whom Naaman's slave girl talks; she is like the beggar in Luther's analogy, telling other beggars where to find food, or, as Luther says elsewhere, she is a little Christ: "As our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other" (*On the Freedom of a Christian*). She has

nothing of worth except the message about salvation in the God of Israel, and she asks nothing for herself in return for this saving news. She has steered her master rightly to the source of his salvation, against all expectations. Naaman's washing (gratis!) in the Jordan prefigures (does it not?) baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which swallows up the sin and death that consume Jew and Gentile, celebrity and ordinary Joe-and-Josephine, alike.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trust Replaced*

The unexpected, no-strings-attached grace of the slave girl's God has changed the mighty commander's heart as well as his skin. He comes to know, as we also have come to know, that there is no other God, nothing else that humans can reliably hang their hearts on (see Luther's Large Catechism): not wealth, not fame, not power or influence—not HGH or propofol, botox or silicone. The God of Israel, revealed to us most fully in Jesus Christ, is the only one worthy of our ultimate trust.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Anointment on the Fly*

The mighty commander returns to his home, and to his former life. But he is changed, and now has more in common with his slave girl than with his former self. He will serve his master faithfully, just as she does, and he will carry with him in his changed heart and on his changed lips the knowledge and the message of the only God who is worthy of the name. Naaman, like his slave girl, has now become a little Christ, anointed to bring Good News and good deeds to all who are consumed by the power of sin and death. We too have that same calling, and like Naaman we are charged to “go in peace” and serve the Lord in word and deed. Thanks be to God!