



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Scott E. Schul

18th Sunday after Pentecost: October 13, 2019

Sermon Title: "The Unlikely Hero"
Sermon Text: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

It is *not* an accident that you are here, today, for worship. Through a seemingly unrelated series of events, people, and places, God has woven a thread throughout your life that has connected everything together. And why has God gone to such lengths? So that God might patiently, persistently, and lovingly draw you closer to God and God's people. It is *not* an accident that you are here, today, for worship.

Have you ever taken a moment to reflect on the people throughout your life whom God has used to draw you closer to faith, closer to the Church, and closer to Jesus Christ? If you think deeply, you'll rediscover those very important people from your faith journey. God has a way of gently, quietly, and subtly nudging people into our pathway at just the right time and place to make a lifelong difference.

We see a prime example of this in today's Old Testament reading. It contains a lot of characters and a complex storyline that can be a little hard to follow. So let me briefly summarize the story and the key players for you. At the center is a Syrian general known as Naaman. He was not a believer in God. To the contrary, he had recently led a victorious army against Israel. But despite his power, might, and vast authority, Naaman had a serious problem. Leprosy. That skin disease typically ravaged one's nerves, respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. Eventually, the nerves in Naaman's extremities would be so compromised that they wouldn't register pain, and so an unnoticed wound or injury might be fatal.¹

Also appearing in our story is the Israelite prophet Elisha. He is a miracle worker. If *anyone* can heal Naaman, it is Elisha. But why would Elisha have any interest in healing a non-believer, especially one who has actively attacked and persecuted his own nation? Well, the answer to that question is easy – Elisha was asked to do so by the King of Israel, who was in a state of terror. You see, Naaman's request to be healed had been passed from Naaman's king to Israel's king, who had recently been on the losing end of a war with Naaman's forces. The King of Israel believed this was a set up. He suspected that Naaman was asking Israel to deliver something that was impossible to deliver, which would then provide a pretext for an even more crushing military invasion. This put the King of Israel into a panic. *But it didn't panic Elisha.*

Elisha had the faith in God that Israel's king so embarrassingly lacked. Elisha's response was not *fear* but *delight*, because of the opportunity it provided to demonstrate God's power and God's supremacy. And so he invited Naaman to travel southward from Syria, into the region of Samaria, to Elisha's home. He invited Naaman to come and be healed.

An important question remains though. How do we connect *Naaman* the Syrian general, and *Elisha* the humble Israelite prophet and healer? They didn't exactly run in the same

company. And so how did Naaman hear about Elisha so that he might request this miraculous healing? As it turns out, the answer to that question is the most important piece of this puzzle. The answer is a young girl.

Now, given the nature of society in that time and place, the fact that a young girl is an important part of this story is newsworthy in and of itself. But note as well that she was an Israelite who was captured in one of the Syrian military raids, and was forced into servitude in Naaman's house. This young girl is a most unlikely hero indeed. In a world of "be seen but not heard," this girl – a foreigner in Naaman's household – a prize of war – had no incentive to speak up or help Naaman. Aside from what he had done to her nation, remember that his disease – leprosy – was something that under Jewish law rendered someone like him ritually unclean and unable to be part of society. His mere appearance must have terrified her.

But despite all of that history and all of those cultural, social, religious, and political differences, this young girl had the courage and the boldness to speak up and offer a solution to what seemed to everyone else to be an unsolvable problem. This young girl, brimming with faith in God, was the one who ultimately connected Naaman to the prophet Elisha in this story. *She* was the unlikely person who by God's grace and providence entered Naaman's story at just the right time and place to decisively alter the course of Naaman's life.

You see, the healing Naaman eventually experienced was more than "skin deep." Through Elisha, God healed Naaman of far more than just leprosy. God healed Naaman's heart. Naaman himself said it best: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Naaman was now a believer. His life would never be the same. It's a great story, isn't it? And yet it's perfectly reasonable to ask, "What's any of *this* got to do with *us*?" Let's answer that very practical question by drawing a few lessons from the lives of some of the main characters in this drama.

From Naaman we learn that even simple water, when combined with God's Word and promise, has the ability by God's grace to work miracles. Naaman reluctantly but obediently immersed himself in the Jordan River seven times, just as Elisha commanded. Naaman's skin was clean. His heart was healed. Naaman was transformed. Most of us here today have had a similar experience. We call it baptism. In baptism we are *claimed* by Christ. *Forgiven* by Christ. And *welcomed* by Christ into his family. It seems ridiculously naive to ascribe such miracles to such a simple ritual. And yet in that very font, we combine mere water with God's Word and promise, and God works miracles equal to *anything* Naaman experienced. And so use this story to reflect upon your own baptism, and the remarkable promises Jesus Christ made to you in water and Word. And if you aren't baptized, talk to me or Pastor Hetrick. God has a miracle in store for you.

From Elisha we learn the power that comes from trusting in God. Elisha reminds us that God keeps God's promises. But Elisha's role in this story also reminds us that God's promises and God's blessings are not for us to hoard. They are to be shared with *all* people – even those who threaten us or who might seem to be our enemy. Use this story to help you trust in God's power to transform even the hardest of hearts.

Finally, we come to my favorite person in the story – the young girl who was carried away by a military invader and forced to serve in her captor’s household. To me she’s the biggest and yet most unlikely hero of them all. She had *every reason* to keep quiet. She had *every reason* to withhold information from her captor - Naaman - that she knew would help him, bless him, and even heal him. But I think her love for God was so abundant that it could not be contained. It had to overflow. And so she did the only thing her heart could allow. She graciously opened her mouth and invited Naaman into a transformational encounter with God.

Who is the unlikely person who played that role in *your* life? Because, as I said at the outset, it is *not* an accident that you are here, today, for worship. Through a seemingly unrelated series of events, people, and places, God has woven a thread throughout your life that has connected everything together. And why has God gone to such lengths? So that God might patiently, persistently, and lovingly draw you closer to God and God’s people. Who is the surprising, faithful person who is the unlikely hero in *your* faith journey? Use this story as a reminder that Jesus is calling *you* to be that person in someone else’s life. Amen.

Citations

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy>