

Two Mule Loads of Dirt

Today's sermon title comes from near the very end of the 2 King's passage which I read earlier. The designated passage from Luke this morning was to advance further in chapter 10, but the passage I read seemed appropriate as within it there is a reference to the events described in this Hebrew passage. Sometimes we forget how closely interconnected is the message we receive from both text sources—that the fundamental message from God to us remains the same. Our Hebrew passage begins with a description of this man Naaman who is the commander of the army of the king of Aram. The time period reflects that Elisha is now the prophet in Israel. The nation is beginning to feel the effects of their failures to follow the covenant promises. Armies from the surrounding nations are making inroads and conquering their territory and taking away captives. We are told in this text that the Lord has given Aram this victory over the Israelites. This victory has also elevated Naaman in the eyes of his king, but Naaman has a problem. Although he is a mighty warrior, he has a skin condition which in the text is called leprosy. The Biblical texts lump all skin diseases under this same name, so in the strictest sense Naaman did not have what modern medicine calls leprosy which is a wasting disease. The Hebrew word just means scaly skin and would have been unsightly. This obvious condition would have affected his public life and advancement. Within the context of the time, any type of skin abnormality led to exclusion, among the Israelites it was a sign of uncleanness—and a reason to be excluded from the community. No specifics are given, but it seems Naaman's great achievements on the battlefield, his recognition, honor and future opportunities are lessened by this disease. The condition and its effects seem to be a topic of conversation and concern in his household. The next individual described in the narrative is a young Israelite girl captive who is now serving Naaman's wife. She is there probably due to her capture in his victory against the king of Israel. She speaks to Naaman's wife saying, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman's wife relates this story to her husband. Upon hearing this, Naaman goes to his overlord the king of Aram and repeats the news that a prophet in Israel could cure him. The Israelite captive remains nameless in this story. Yet despite her lowly position in society, it is her action which begins the process of healing. When Naaman repeats the news of the healing power of this Israeli prophet to his king, the king sends a letter his counterpart, the king of Israel. The original statement seems not to have been heard correctly at this stage. The words of the captive were that the power to heal resided in the prophet who spoke for the God of Israel, not in Israel's king. Naaman is: "Go then, and I will send a letter along to the king of Israel." This letter stated, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." Naaman takes the letter and a significant amount of compensation to Israel's king for this expected cure. The king of Israel was not real happy to receive this letter. In his view this is an attempt to create a quarrel between the nations—to get an excuse to again attack them. His response was, "Am I God, to give life or death?" Israel's king assumes he is being commanded to do this healing and recognizes he does not have the power. Elisha hears of the request by the king of Aram and the response of Israel's king's. Elisha then sends a message to Israel's king. Elisha is reminding him that instead of being distressed, he should have turned to God through his representative. "Let him come to

me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” says Elisha. So far Naaman having been told that it is God’s prophet, who can heal him, goes not to the prophet about whom he was told, but to one he recognizes as having power: his king. His king sends him, not to the prophet but to another king, one he recognizes as having power. Both men are powerful according to the world. Naaman is seeking his cure from someone with the kind of power he recognizes—but those to whom he goes know nothing of the power of healing which is what he seeks. Naaman is a Syrian and does not recognize Israel’s God as being powerful—after all, he had just defeated the people of Israel, so their God could not be powerful or they would not have been defeated. But upon receiving Elisha’s word, the king of Israel sends Naaman on to Elisha. Naaman and his retinue of horses and the chariots which demonstrate his power and wealth continue on to the home of Elisha. When they halt there, Naaman expects certain behavior to be accorded to him—some recognition of his power and status from this prophet. Instead, he receives the prescription for his cure from a messenger, a servant, not Elisha himself. “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” Naaman finds this insulting. Not only has Elisha not come out to him to provide his cure by calling on the name of the Lord, he has instead sent a servant who has told him to go bathe in the river Jordan seven times. In fact, Naaman becomes so angry he leaves because surely the rivers in Syria, his home, are every bit as beneficial as the water from the river Jordan. Here the narration takes another twist. Naaman in a fit of temper is about to leave without even trying to follow the instructions. His pride and understanding of power lead him to reject such a simple solution—washing in the waters of the Jordan—Israel’s river could never be as beneficial as water from his homeland, right? But the servants who have journeyed with him intervene. They ask 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.’?” In other words, you have come this long way, what have you to lose by doing what you were told would heal you? So for whatever reason, Naaman did what Elisha had told him before leaving. Isn’t it interesting that all the great and powerful men in this story are such fools. It is the servants who impart wisdom. Both kings misconstrue the simple problem of Naaman’s disease, the king of Aram demanding that the king of Israel cure his servant when the servant girl clearly stated that only the prophet could do such a thing. And the king of Israel, ignoring the great prophet in his own country, performs outlandish actions of deepest mourning and tearing his clothes in despair thinking the Aramaean are using Naaman’s leprosy to begin a war. And Naaman himself, the great military leader initially refuses to perform the simple request which will heal him. Isn’t it something to consider that in this story, the cleansing actions of God are found in the unlikeliest places—beginning with the actions of a captive servant and aided by other unnamed servants. Isn’t it also interesting that the one benefiting from this healing was a foreigner—not just a foreigner but the commander of the enemy’s army? Because when Naaman was persuaded to go to the Jordan and immerse himself seven times, his flesh became like that of a young boy—he was clean. God’s actions brought about by unlikely people brought healing to an unlikely person. After his healing Naaman returns to Elisha’s house and speaks to Elisha declaring: “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” Elisha refuses the payment of gold, silver and garments from the wealth that Naaman’s power has procured. After Elisha’s refusal then Naaman makes the request which formed the basis of this sermon’s title: “If not, please let two

mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offerings or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.” This reflects another interesting decision by Naaman. He has already received what he desired. The disease that was the bane of his existence has been lifted—he can go home and resume his life as a successful warrior of power and prestige without looking back. The one who brought the gift of the healing is asking nothing in payment—a free gift has been given to him—a restored life. But Naaman does not want to leave behind the power which has touched and healed him. Somehow he wants to take this local God of Israel back to his homeland. He makes this request in a very literal way—asking for two mule loads of dirt thinking he can thus take some small part of God home with him. As he is leaving Naaman has one final thing to say to Elisha. He has pledged to worship the Lord, but then makes an amendment—when he is with his king who goes to worship in the house of Rim’mon, he will bow down there. You might expect Elisha to condemn his compromise but instead Elisha bids him “Go in peace.” There are several ways we can look at this passage—from the wisdom shown by those who were servants to the foolishness of those with power or from the unusual choice to heal an enemy of Israel. This is the salient point that Jesus points out in the Luke 4 passage: “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” These are good things to consider. But in this healing we have another example of God’s grace—the healing was a free gift to Naaman. Naaman did not fully understand the power of the gift—thinking he could carry some of the power home with him in the two mule loads of dirt. He made some promises, but then added conditions to them. In many ways that is the way we also live. We know that we are given the free gift of God’s love through Jesus Christ, but we often look for God in the wrong places—focusing on the two mule loads of dirt—that are tangible. We look for God in structures, not in people. We look for God in those things that are familiar—our own rivers. God does not reside where we think, but is active where and how God desires to be. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.