

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

The title I used for today's sermon is taken from a commentary written by a Hebrew scholar and seminary professor Dr. John Holbert about the passage from 2nd Kings. The title also brings to mind a once popular country song titled similarly: Looking for love in all the wrong places. Probably both titles convey a truth about us...we tend to fasten our hopes and dreams on things that are present in our world; that seem to lead where we want to go when we fail to examine them closely. The country song writer spoke of looking for love in bars and other places where the interactions are superficial and require little commitment. The reflection on the scripture passage seems to have this in common because the individual begins seeking is described as seeking healing, not God. The narrative begins before Naaman begins seeking healing. Ironically the quest for healing starts through a captured young girl compassion for her enslaver. Naaman is a victorious warrior who has captured this young Israeli girl and installed her in his household as a slave to his wife. When the narrative begins Naaman's rank and position as the commander of the army of the King of Aram is given. Aram is now known as Syria. Hostility between the two kingdoms led to war. Naaman won a great battle against Israel, who was probably Jehoram although he is not named here. Jehoram was a king who had not sought to follow the God's ways. The narrative tells us that God gave this victory to Israel's enemy Aram, but also does not specifically give a reason. Because of his military success, Naaman was considered a great man, but even this great man had an issue...he suffered from an unpleasant skin condition which is translated leprosy in the text. This problem was not the disease we know as leprosy. However, any skin condition was called by this name and anyone with it was considered ritually unclean. Other places where the same Hebrew word is used it is clearly something related to fungal infections which spread easily making it necessary to burn clothing, etc. that contacted it. After these opening scene setting remarks, we are introduced to the "young girl captive" from Israel. She tells Naaman's wife that if he were to go to the prophet in Israel, Naaman could be cured. This captive shows care and concern for the one who enslaved her. This tidbit of information is carried to Naaman by his wife. Although the narrative does not say that Naaman had previously sought to be cured; he quickly takes this information and places it before his king...Naaman shows no interest in seeking out Israel's prophet for aid, but turns to someone he considers powerful. Aram's king recognizes he has no power to heal, but wants to aid his successful army commander so he shows his power to aid Naaman by exerting his political power over Israel's king. So he writes a letter, not to the prophet but to Israel's king. In this letter, Aram's king tells Israel's king he is sending his servant Naaman there to be cured. No mention of God or prophet...he views his power enough to compel Israel's king to cure his favored commander. When Naaman sets out he takes gold and silver and garments along with the letter to Israel's king. Israel's king knows he has no power to cure Naaman. He panics thinking this letter is a prelude to another attack upon him. His response also is not to seek help from God or God's prophet. Instead he tears his clothing in panic and fear bemoaning his fate. Elisha, the prophet the Israel captive had spoken about hears of this uproar. Elisha sends to Israel's king and tells him to send Naaman to him so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel. At each step of the narrative so far, only the

captive girl in Syria has shown knowledge of where healing can be found. She seems the only one to understand where healing can be found. The others all seek answers in the systems of worldly, human power—the kings who are full of pride in their rank and power think that they can achieve what they want through using it. Naaman has arrived with what might be considered a bribe to gain with wealth what he wants from the king. He proceeds to Elisha's house with his horses and chariots that symbolize his power and symbols of his wealth. There he receives instructions from Elisha's servant; not Elisha himself. Naaman's reception at Elisha's home illustrates that this approach is not going to work. It doesn't even get him a direct meeting with the prophet. The servant's instructions for him to go bathe seven times in the Jordan offends and angers Naaman. The Naaman who comes to Elisha's house is not used to needing to ask for anything. The man who rolls up in front of Elisha's house is leading a procession of power—horses and gleaming chariots, boxes of silver and gold ready to buy a cure—a man so accustomed to bows of honor and unquestioning obedience that not receiving the respect his pride demands causes him to reject the simple instructions delivered through the words of the prophet's servant. He plans on leaving. Naaman has assumed he will get what he needs because of his power and status. However, Naaman's ways and the ways of the world he subscribes to are not the ways of the God of Israel. God's ways run counter to his understanding of from where aid can and will come. Naaman has learned of the possibility of healing from a humble source, a young Israelite girl who is a powerless slave. Although he acted on this possibility delivered through his wife, now his openness to the humbling and humble ways of the Lord will be tested. The prophet has dishonored the great man who has come to his door. He does not show himself, but instead sends a messenger. And the message itself is a further humbling of Naaman. No special rite of healing will be performed. Instead he is told to "go, wash in the Jordan seven times." Naaman's reaction to this self-serve process for healing in a third rate river enrages him. The Jordan has to be inferior to the rivers of Syria. Again, what saves the situation is the courage of his servants who challenge his reaction. These servants confront Naaman and convince him to accept and do what has been instructed. He has the grace to listen to advice from outside the bubble of power and privilege which has guided his course so far. He is convinced to swallow his pride about entering this very small body of water that looks more a stream than the waters of the rivers of Damascus. While his entourage watches, Naaman descends into the Jordan and dips himself the required seven times. The seven times echoes the priestly rituals of cleansing specified in Leviticus 14. When this has been accomplished Naaman emerges from the river not only without the signs of his skin disease but with the skin of a young boy. During this not only is Naaman's skin remade but his very self is remade. Naaman returns to Elisha's house to stand humbly before the prophet to give thanks. He now confesses his new found faith in the God of Israel as the only true God and offers Elisha the presents he has brought with him...now it is not an incentive to gain something but an offering of gratitude. Elisha however rejects the offering saying that the power of God has done the healing and it is not for sale. It is a gift, a sign of grace given. Naaman then professes the desire to worship only God and requests some sacred soil to take back to Syria so he can worship God. This desire to worship God is underlined by his plea for leniency when his duties to the king require his attendance in the temple of Rimmon. Elisha's

response is “Go in peace.” Naaman returns home a different man, a clean man with loads of foreign dirt on which to worship the true God. Elisha’s sending words are a sign of grace as well as Naaman is granted this plea about his future behavior in which he will only worship Israel’s God. Throughout this story it is the humble people who move Naaman toward the healing and transformation he needs. Kings and men of power see things differently than slaves and prophets. They feel powerful and able to control everything. The inability of either king to heal Naaman exposes the royal pretensions to ultimacy; they have no power to heal or restore. Elisha has intervened to defuse the interactions between the two kings; to defuse the Israelite king’s vexation and to also alleviate Naaman’s suffering. Although Elisha’s reception of Naaman shows him the limitations of what he holds powerful, Naaman receives compassionate healing despite his deeds against the people of Israel in his role as commander of the army which had defeated Israel and enslaved some of her people. In this narrative God’s work is done through the humble; the powerless not the powerful and the prideful Naaman is shown compassion and receives healing. Even though he has failed to realize the extent of God’s power as he believes he must take some Israeli dirt back with him to find God’s presence with him when he goes home. Naaman has sought healing in the wrong places—in the power of the world’s systems and values. When he learns to humble himself, he receives the gift he sought. We easily grasp the lesson that Naaman receives—or do we? When we face difficult events do we turn to God and his teachings for our lives? Do we seek to control the events of our lives through the systems of power around us? Do we grant the systems around us power over our lives which lead us away from God? In this narrative, it was not the powerful who were the agents of God’s mercy. Scripture always indicates to us that God works through the unlikely and in unexpected ways. Scripture also tells us that we don’t need the soil from a special place to find God’s presence; to praise and worship our Lord. In the passage from Luke’s gospel a description is given of Jesus sending out disciples—seventy of them—not the twelve we usually think of as being followers. Jesus sends them out “on ahead of him to every town and place where he himself intended to go.” That expresses God’s intent to be in all places. Jesus came to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God. Here he is authorizing a wider band of disciples to go out and do the same thing. He wants them to proclaim a whole new way to live, a whole new way to look at life and this world, a whole new way to orient not just this or that sideline feature to one’s life but the whole life—every jot and tittle of one’s existence. Jesus does not promise easy. This is not what many people want—the promise of easy. But beyond the injunctions in this passage about wolves and possible rejections is the promise of the joy which can be found through the presence of God. Even when Jesus tells his disciples to wipe the dust of the rejecting town off their feet, he still tells them to conclude their comments with the reminder that the kingdom of God is near. Jesus calls for his disciples to speak the truth in love and to do it urgently because the stakes are high. Our culture has given its allegiance to other kingdoms than the Kingdom of God. Some give their allegiance to the kingdom of Wall Street. It says we must make as much money as possible so we can have the lives we want. Others swear allegiance to the kingdom of Hollywood which says only the young, thin, beautiful and rich have any value. Others pledge to the kingdom of Madison avenue which tries to sell what will make life complete. There are many things which claim power and seek to convince

us of their power. Yet these things cannot truly provide what we need; the healing and restoration we need to restore our lives and give us peace. If we seek to find our fulfillment in any of these things, we will fail to find what we truly need and are seeking—the presence of God who loves us and has the actual power to transform our lives. As disciples we are called to follow Jesus by practicing the values of the kingdom of God among people who have given their loyalty to a lot of other kingdoms. We are called to proclaim that God’s kingdom is right here to one and all. This message is not always well received because some will not give up their allegiance to those other kingdoms because although we like to claim to be a Christian nation, there is not much about our culture which follows Jesus’ teachings about love of the other, of providing for the marginalized with whom he spent his time. All those other kingdoms may promise to make us happy, but only following Jesus in living out the values of the kingdom of God can bring true fulfillment to life. God’s reign of grace and truth and love and peace is the ultimate reality before which all other competing loyalties will eventually fade. If we look to them for what we need, we are looking in the wrong place.