

GOD IS PLEASED WITH REPENTANT FAITH

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this third Sunday of the Epiphany season:

Then he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as thus had spoken the man of God. And his flesh returned as (the) flesh of (a) young boy, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came and stood before his face; and he said, "Behold! Now I know that (there are) no gods in all the earth (except) for the One in Israel..."¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

From the texts for this day we have heard and are given to understand that God is certainly pleased when we hear and believe His Word in our hearts, with our minds, and show it forth in our lives. Humble trust in the Lord and all His promises is encouraged in us by our readings. Worldly pride, and trust in our own strength, position, wealth and might have been uncovered as temptations that stand in the way of true faith and its responses. To summarize the teaching for this week: God's cleansing Word is surely for those who approach Him in repentant faith. And - His corrective Word is for those who approach Him on any other grounds.

The Lord's working His wonders are clearly shown in the account of the cleansing of Naaman. His Law is there, under Elisha's actions and words. His Gospel is there for the repentant sinner. Finally, in the text from II Kings, we discover the Lord's affirmation that all callings and circumstances are His to use to bring good to those who hold to God by faith. (That is shown in the Israelite slave maiden's confession to her

¹ II Kings 5:14-15a.

Master's wife. It is shown in the words of that Lord's servants to call him to repentance and cleansing).

Truly these readings are accounts of faith – beginning with, and ending with, God's faith. They are narratives that recount the alien work of God – that use of His Word that convicts and condemns. In particular, in the Old Testament recounting of the healing of Naaman, God shows His mercy work, poured out, as it was, upon the repentant. From this we learn that God is pleased with repentant faith. The true story begins with just the opposite. Elisha, hearing of Naaman's mission and the Israelite King Joram's lack of faith, says to the King, and through him to Naaman,

*"Let him come to me, that he may know there is (a) prophet in Israel."*²

*Then Naaman came in horses and in chariots, and stopped at the door of the house of Elisha.*³

The great warrior comes to the great prophet without any show of humility or repentance. This display shows how important Naaman is, and there is a not-so-subtle intent to let Elisha know he is worthy of being helped. Add this to the command of the King of Aram (Syria) that the prophet is to be so much as commanded by the King of Israel to heal the conqueror, and we have a show-of-force designed to intimidate.

Is that how some people, perhaps you at times, approach God when you want Him to do something for you, or someone you love? It is tempting to try to show, or tell, God how much one has done for him, with the thought that God will surely

² *II Kings 5:8b.*

³ *II Kings 5:9.*

reward one for the efforts to please Him. Yet, we learn that Naaman receives healing only after he repents of his arrogance and anger at the prophet's demeanor and commands. God is not impressed by such thoughts or show, and neither is His prophet.

Then Elisha sent to him his messenger to say, "Go and bathe seven times in (the) Jordan, and your flesh will return to you and be clean."⁴

The prophet knows the will of God, that is to bring repentance, to heal and raise up the broken-hearted. His actions are done to display to the commander of the greatest armies of the conquering King of Syria, that all his pomp, accomplishments, favor from kings, and person are not enough to cause God to approach him – even in the person of prophet.

While the Old Testament Law prevented the clean from contacting the unclean – and Naaman was unclean on at least two accounts: he was not a Jew, and he had leprosy – that is not the prime reason Elisha stays away. The prophets could, and did, touch the unclean to bring cleansing to the repentant. No, he gives his command, the Word of the Lord, that Naaman might know that God would cleanse on account of His Word, on account of Who He is, and not because Naaman was an important person.

Naaman's understands the slights to his person and position. His attitude and reaction to Elisha's not coming out to meet him, and commanding him to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River for cleansing makes this clear:

Then Naaman was angry and he went and said, "Behold! I thought he would come out to me; and stand and cry in (the) Name of YHWH his Elohim; and wave his hand over the place and cure the leprosy. Are not Abanah and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better

⁴ II Kings 5:10.

than all waters of the Israel? Why not wash in them and be clean?" And he turned and he went in (a) rage.⁵

Have you ever become frustrated when you asked God for something – perhaps a small miracle – through one of His servants – a pastor perhaps – and been told to simply trust in your baptism, that God would fulfill His promises in His time and in His ways? Naaman's frustration with the simplicity of God's chosen means is one that most Christians may understand. We, like Naaman, are human, and like a good show - the more powerful and awesome the better – as God works His wonders to perform.

Most of you have probably discerned an allusion to Holy Baptism in the commands and fulfillment given by God in this reading for the day. Naaman, given the simple command to wash – which in his completing the act is recounted with the word we translate "baptized" – wants more of God. Surely a simple dipping in water can't do such great things!

That is the same attitude displayed by a vocal minority of Christianity today. They claim that God's chosen means of imparting the death and resurrection of Jesus is not enough. They believe that one must have knowledge of God's word - that one must believe first in God as an act of will or conscience - and then be baptized as a sign or symbol of the faith one has. They reject the teaching of God in First Peter, "there is also an antitype that saves us – baptism" (3:21a, NKJV), and the teaching of St. Paul which declares baptism the means by which God saved us, "through the washing of rebirth and

⁵ *II Kings* 5:11-12.

renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior..." (Titus 3:5b-6, *ESV*).

People who approach God in the manner in which Naaman originally did, find themselves, as he did, angry and unsatisfied with God's chosen means of physical, and more importantly, spiritual, cleansing. "Why," the enthusiasts of our day cry, "do you say that God works so simply. Baptism cannot save; the Sacrament of the Altar cannot bring forgiveness with the Body and Blood of Jesus! People want the flash and bang, the feeling of the spirit working in our hearts; immediate miracle healings; visible signs – speaking in strange tongues, images in our toast or anything but Holy Absolution, Baptism and the Lord's Supper (those are just what we do to show we have faith, they say)!"

(It is important to note now that such corrections from this pulpit are not done to merely "snap" denominations whose confessions differ from that of the Church. They are given to warn, rebuke, teach and correct the hearers here – as is the duty and calling of those who are placed in the Office of the Holy Ministry!⁶)

If the Word today has brought you to the point of repentance – for rejection of God's chosen and revealed means of grace – or for tolerating teachings other than that of Scripture regarding God's chosen means of grace as if they are not church divisive – take heart. For God's word of Law brings one to the need for turning from sin, and returning

⁶ cf. II Timothy 2:25; 3:16

in faith to the means God has chosen to bring cleansing from sin and its effects. Your sins are forgiven on account of the death of Christ Jesus.

Naaman serves as an example for all misbelievers, disbelievers, rejecters of the truth, for just as God turned him, so He desires to turn you from sin and give you forgiveness in the One into Whom you are baptized. Hear again what happened to Naaman, reflecting on the means God called to bring Him back to the washing of cleansing in the River Jordan.

Then his servants came near and said to him, "My father, if (a) great Word the prophet worded to you, would you not have done it? Then how much more, when he says to you, 'Wash and be cleansed?'"⁷

God uses his servants, in their office, without any indication of faith on their part – other than faith that the word of the prophet might be enough to effect God's cleansing – to call Naaman to repentance. We do not know the religious background of those accompanying the warrior that day. We do know that they humbly spoke the truth in love and concern for him, to call him to try the Word of the Lord as he received it. They, who had come from a pagan land to attend their master, wanted him to take the prophet at God's Word! (Maybe there is more going on here that we first understand. Or, maybe, they are reflecting the "it can't hurt" concept of trying miracle cures). In any event, God uses their words to turn the heart of wrath into a heart of trust, as our text continues:

Then he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as thus had spoken the man of God...⁸

⁷ II Kings 5:13.

That Naaman repents is displayed in his decision, and action, to return and dip his unclean body in the muddy, turbulent, dirty Jordan River. He follows the word of the Lord literally. He dipped himself, as our text literally reads, “he baptized in the Jordan seven times according to the words of Elisha.”⁹ (His self-baptism is akin to that of John the Baptizing One’s – into repentance, not for forgiveness as is ours in Christ). Naaman turned from His sin, repented, and followed the simple things of God.

*And his flesh returned as (the) flesh of (a) young boy, and he was clean.*¹⁰

God worked through the means He had chosen. A literal rendering may actually read, “and his flesh repented (becoming) as (the) flesh of a young boy.” Through the washing, the skin stained with the effects of sin in the flesh, was cleansed. The turning of the skin reflects the turning of the heart of the man, the warrior, the great leader of Aram’s armies.

Naaman’s repentance is declared as he then returns to Elisha to give thanks. There, in faith, Naaman, the non-Jew, powerful leader of the nation that had conquered its enemies (including Israel), confesses the words repeated here today:

*“Behold! Now I know that (there are) no Elohim in all the earth (except) for the One in Israel...”*¹¹

Do you know the absolute truth that there are no gods in all the earth (except for the One in Israel? Though that earthly nation no longer exists (the modern State is

⁸ II Kings 5:14a.

⁹ II Kings 5:14a, LXX.

¹⁰ II Kings 5:14b.

¹¹ II Kings 5:15a.

not, nor ever will be, the same as ancient Israel) God is found where His Word calls sinners to repentance, and His Son is declared as the One who forgives their sins.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Epiphany III (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

II Kings 5:1-15a; Romans 12:16-21; Matthew 8:1-13

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TRANSLATION, SECOND DRAFT

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Then Elisha sent to him his messenger to say, “Go and bathe seven times in (the) Jordan, and your flesh will return to you and be clean.”¹⁴

Then Naaman was angry and he went and said, “Behold! I thought he would come out to me; and stand and cry in (the) Name of YHWH his Elohim; and wave his hand over the place and cure the leprosy. Are not Abanah and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all waters of the Israel? Why not wash in them and be clean?” And he turned and he went in (a) rage.¹⁵

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¹² II Kings 5:8b.

¹³ II Kings 5:9.

¹⁴ II Kings 5:10.

¹⁵ II Kings 5:11-12.

¹⁶ II Kings 5:13.

¹⁷ II Kings 5:14.

¹⁸ II Kings 5:15a.