

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Epiphany 6 -- February 12th and February 15th, 2009

2 Kings 5:1-14

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Dear children of God who have experienced the love of God. Amen

I am going to say a name, and when I do I want you to remember the first thought that pops into your head. You don't have to say it out loud. Just remember it. Are you ready? Okay, here it is: **Ponce de Leon**. Perhaps you remembered that Ponce de Leon was a Spanish conquistador. Or maybe you recalled that Ponce de Leon was the first governor of Puerto Rico. Or maybe you remembered that he was among the first Europeans to set foot on the U.S. mainland.

All of these statements are true, but they are not all that well known. I am guessing that most of you connected Ponce de Leon with something else, something that is more mythical than historical. As the story goes, Ponce de Leon launched an expedition into what is now Florida to locate the Fountain of Youth. Even though Ponce de Leon never found what he was looking for, the search for the fountain of youth continues to this day. People are obsessed with looking and feeling younger. Cosmetics and cosmetic surgery are billion dollar industries, and they are showing no signs of slowing down. More and more men and women are getting lifts and tucks and Botox injections, all with the goal of recapturing their youth.

What if I told you about a place that can do more than make you regain your youthfulness, it is a place that will let you live forever. And it won't even cost you anything. What if I told you that you don't have to exercise more or eat less, and you can still live forever? If you are skeptical, if you don't want to get your hopes up, if you don't want to be disappointed, all I ask you to do today is listen. Listen to one man's miraculous story and draw your own conclusions. Look at what the Lord did for him, and ...

Theme: See What Kind Of God We Have!

- 1. He loves the unlikable!**
- 2. He gives the unobtainable!**

Meet Naaman, the commander of the armies of the king of Aram. He was a decorated war hero. He was a revered and respected leader. When Naaman walked into a room, everyone else stopped what they were doing. Nothing stood in the way of Naaman. No one got the better of Naaman...except Naaman. Naaman had a reputation that was larger than life, but somehow he had contracted a disease that threatened to take his life. He could defend himself from spears and arrows, but there was nothing he could do to get rid of the leprosy that covered his body. The Bible doesn't tell us what Naaman did to try to find a cure for his leprosy. We don't know how many doctors he saw or how many magic potions he drank or how many healing salves he applied to his sores. But this account does reveal two things about Naaman. He was sick, and he was desperate. How desperate was he? When a lowly slave girl told Naaman's wife that she knew of a prophet in Israel who could cure him of his leprosy, she told Naaman and Naaman told the king and the king wrote a letter to Israel's king asking for his assistance.

Israel's king, however, didn't appreciate this plea for help. In fact, he thought it was a trap. He thought that the king of Aram was making this request as a pretext for declaring war on Israel. He didn't trust the king of Aram. He didn't believe that the prophet Elisha could cure Naaman's leprosy. And the prophet Elisha was embarrassed. He was embarrassed by his own king's lack of faith. He wanted Naaman to understand that he and his king had nothing in common. And so he said: **“Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel” (8)**. Those words gave Naaman hope. Those words caused Naaman to spring into action. He gave orders for his men to break camp, and they didn't stop until they reached the house of Elisha.

But when Naaman and his entourage arrived, Elisha didn't come out and call upon his God to heal him. Elisha didn't come out of his house at all. Instead he dispatched a messenger with instructions for Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan River. “He wants me to do what?” Naaman roared. “He wants me to wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan? The waters of my homeland are so much better. The rivers of Aram are so much cleaner.” And Naaman's hope turned into rage.

Once again the Lord worked through servants to accomplish his purposes. Earlier it had been a Jewish slave girl. Now it was Naaman's personal attendants. They reasoned with him: **“My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’” (13)**. What the servants said made sense to Naaman. It didn't matter how he was healed, as long as he was healed. And so Naaman followed Elisha's instructions. He dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, **“and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy” (14)**.

Naaman's military career had undoubtedly taken a toll on his body. The bitter cold and scorching heat, the wind and the rain, not to mention the many scars he had earned on the field of battle, all of these things contributed to his rough and tough exterior. Add to that the leprous sores, and he must have looked just terrible. But then Naaman took a bath, a special cleansing bath that the Lord himself had drawn for him in the Jordan River, and everything changed. The slave girl's words came true. The leprosy miraculously disappeared. And Naaman was young again.

This is a great story, but it's more than a story. This is an account about the miraculous transformation of a man, but it also has much to teach us about our God, a God who comes to sinners like you and me and says: You too can be young again – eternally young. Naaman's story teaches us that our God loves the unlovable. Can you imagine a more unlikely candidate to be the object of God's grace than Naaman? He was a sworn enemy of Israel. That meant he was a sworn enemy of the God of Israel. But that didn't matter to God. He saw this man's need, and he met his need. God showed unconditional love to Naaman because God is love.

And if God could love a man like Naaman, there is no doubt that God loves you too. No matter how checkered your past may be, no matter how many skeletons are hanging in your closet, God still loves you. God loves you so much that he sent his Son to take away your sins. Every unkind word. Every impure

thought. **“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin” (I John 1:7).** The account of Naaman’s healing also reminds us that our God is a God of second chances. When Elisha told Naaman what he needed to do to cure his leprosy, he didn’t run for the river and dive right in. He didn’t get down on his hands and knees and thank God. Instead he became angry. He became angry with God because he thought he knew better than God.

Sound familiar? “God, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? God, why is there so much pain and suffering in my life? God, why are you allowing all these things to happen and why aren’t you doing anything about it?” We want to accept God on our terms, not his. We want God to do things our way, not his. And when God doesn’t give us what we want when we want it, we get angry. God used Naaman’s servants to bring him to his senses, and he eventually acknowledged that God’s way was the best way. Perhaps it was a friend who brought you here today. Perhaps your friend wanted to introduce or reintroduce you to your Savior. Jesus wants you to know that the past has been forgotten. Jesus wants you to know that your sins have been forgiven. You don’t have to bathe in any river. You don’t have to do anything because he has done everything for you.

Finally, the story of Naaman assures us that our God can do anything. Sure, he cured Naaman of an incurable disease, but that was only the second greatest miracle God performed in his life. When Naaman saw what the Lord had done, when Naaman saw that his sores were gone, he responded with this beautiful confession of faith: **“Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel” (II Kings 5:15).** The man who had no choice but to trust in the word of a young slave girl had come to possess the same child-like faith. The Lord had given Naaman a second chance at life, and even better than that, much more important than that, he had given him the hope of eternal life.

This isn’t the kind of church where people come up to the altar and the pastor lays his hand on them and heals them, but this is a church that believes in miracles. We believe that Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. We believe that Jesus performed miracles of helping and healing when he walked on this earth. We believe that Jesus died on the cross in our place. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead to take away our sins. We believe that that faith itself is a miracle that God creates in our hearts to believe these unbelievable truths.

The Fountain of Youth isn’t somewhere in Florida. It’s right here. It is written in the pages of this book. The message of forgiveness through Jesus rejuvenates the sin-sick soul. The message of salvation through Jesus gives us a new lease on life. The message of the Bible is a message for children, a message of comfort and hope and peace for all of God’s children. And your loving Father wants you to know that you too can be young again. Amen.