

Sermon preached by The Rev. Danielle Thompson
The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
Sunday, July 3, 2016
Proper 9, Year C: 2 Kings 5:1-4; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Last year was our first year to visit Cape Cod as a family, coming all the way from our home in Birmingham, AL, and it was also the first time we had vacationed for more than a week or two. So, naturally, I observed some differences between how we prepared for the trip last year and how we prepared for the trip this year. And the biggest difference? Our stuff. Last year, we packed like we wanted to be in the frequent flyer lane at airport security. And then we spent roughly two thirds of our vacation at Stop & Shop in Orleans. This year, we were emboldened: grab the life jackets; bring the chess set; don't forget the Cajun spice mix! We even had a long, animated conversation debating the merits of packing our favorite cast iron skillet, although this may be a deliberation specific to Southern families on the move.

I don't know if any of this rings true for your experience or not—maybe even the skillet. But at the very least, it is a way to connect with Namaan, whose story we hear today in the Second Book of Kings. Namaan is a foreign military professional. He commands a powerful army, and when we meet him today, he is traveling south to Israel, with his entire retinue, in the days before 7-11. But in addition to whatever provisions Namaan and his family and his servants need, he is taking with him silver, gold, fine garments, horses, and chariots. Namaan is carrying with him his familiar things, the things he relies on: the instruments of politics, and the instruments of war.

But that's not all he brings with him. Let's not forget the entire purpose of Namaan's trip. Namaan arrives before the King of Israel bearing a lot of attractive, amenable, persuasive things. And, he arrives bearing his limitations. He brings with him a concrete, visible, weakness. Namaan suffers from some sort of skin disease, a malady troubling enough that he has taken his slave girl's advice and has come to this smaller, less robust kingdom to offer up his stuff and announce his desire to be cured.

We should also mention that Namaan brings with him his expectations: he expects the King of Israel will help him; he expects to conquer his disease the way he conquers kingdoms like this one; and he expects to royally compensate his healer for his or her work. But Namaan's expectations, as is so often the case, are the first things to go. The King of Israel panics and has no answers for him; when Namaan is finally sent to Elisha, the prophet does not come out to meet him. And then Elisha prescribes something absurd-sounding and, for Namaan, humiliating—in both the popular and the proper senses of the word. For it requires that Namaan be humbled: that he be brought close down to the earth in the silty humus-filled water of the Jordan River. And that he divest himself—that he strip down and remember his basic, armor-less humanity. Improbably, no stuff is required for this cure of Elisha's: no magic touch, no special words, no charms and potions ... *no liturgy!* There is a not a thurible in sight on the banks of the river. Nothing at all is needed except for Namaan himself ... and his desire for health ... and, of course, his disease.

Interestingly, when we lay Namaan's story alongside what is happening for Jesus and his disciples in the Gospel of Luke, we see this idea of being humbled intensified to the point of extreme vulnerability, even risk. For as Jesus is sending his followers ahead of him, to prepare his way along the road to Jerusalem, he warns them, plainly, that they are going out as lambs—innocent, untried, precious children—among wolves. They carry with them no guile, no craftiness, no willfulness—none of the things that set a person up to succeed among forces that are savage, cunning, and violent. In fact, Jesus' disciples don't carry with them anything at all! Namaan brought people, horses, money, clothes. My family brought a fourteen-year old cat and a Soda Stream machine. But Jesus tells his followers to bring no money, no extra clothes, no *sandals*, let alone horses and chariots. And that they ought to acquire nothing new on the road, including new connections. They are to walk with the practiced efficiency of New Yorkers: no eye contact, ruthless economy of speech, and no meandering: total commitment to the path ahead. Because otherwise, as any urban dweller knows, you run into people. Or people run over you.

And that is one part of the reason why Jesus gives them these instructions: he advocates no distractions. No sidebars. No waylaying. If you worshipped last week, you will remember that Jesus met three people on the road who all had the some reason for not dropping everything and following him immediately—and Jesus was not sympathetic. The point of those encounters was not to make us think Jesus is edgy or impatient, but to show us that Jesus is nothing but serious. His message to those people on the road and his message to his followers today is that the most important things are happening *right now*. God is working it all out, everything that matters, *right now*. And what God needs is *you*. Not your horses or your garments. Not your power or your money. Not your ideas about what you need to be doing, or how things need to be going, or what should be happening instead—God just needs you.

The question arises, of course, for what? What does God need us for? What *is this* most important thing God is asking of us? What does Jesus send us to do with such intention and focus and faithfulness? If we want to explore that question, we need to first realize that things aren't exactly as they seem with these disciples. Yes, they lack some of the more vicious, survivalistic anti-virtues of the wolves they will meet; and no, they don't have any *thing* on them: no bag, no purse, nothing extra to back them up. But they aren't completely empty-handed. Like Namaan, they come bearing gifts. Not stuff, however. Not capital that will buy favor or good will from a stranger, or that will add to any king's earthly treasure chest. What they have to give isn't even something that belongs to them. Jesus' followers bear the spiritual gifts that God is sharing with them. Note the present, active tense here: God is sharing with them. Spiritual gifts are not a currency that God deposits in our account for us to use any way we want to. They are a current that passes back and forth between us and God, suffusing us with God's grace but more importantly binding us to God in this reciprocal relationship of gift, and opening up to us everything that belongs to God. And there is nothing to hold on to here—*no stuff*. There is only what we receive from God, and what we *share* from God. Jesus tells his followers, *whenever you enter a house, first say*, "Peace to this house!" Jesus tells his followers, *whenever you enter a town, cure the sick who are there*. And Jesus' followers tell him: "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!" God has shared peace with us; God has shared power for healing with us; and God has shared power over the forces of destruction—demons, scorpions and snakes, and wolves that stalk after lambs—with us.

But there is another side to what God gives us. God shares so much with us for the healing of the world. Yet, never does God forget that we need healing, too. *Never* can *your* restored humanity and *my* restored humanity be parsed out from the restoration of the world, as though we were the stuff that God brings into battle, like the silver and gold Namaan took with him to secure his wellness. In fact, Namaan shows us, yet again, when Elisha has left him alone with God, and when we see him in the same posture as Jesus' disciples—humbled, focused, necessarily open to the future and to whatever it is that God will give him—that all God wants is you. All God wants is your *self*. All God wants is your desire for health. All God wants is your disease—your light *and* your shadow. All God wants is to meet just you, just there—and not so that you can get better and go to work for God, but so God can work in you. Not so that you can hit the road and carry God to the world, but so God can carry you along the road and into the world, to love and serve him. And then it will be your life, and no other thing, that shows the world who God is.