

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

July 3, 2022

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP (inspired by Psalm 30)

Sing praises to God, all you faithful ones

God hears us in our fear and our sorrow

Where there was no way

God leads us in a new way

Where there was no mercy

God surprises us with fresh mercy

Where there was weeping

God invites us to step into a new dance.

(Rev. Susan A. Blain, *UCC Worship Ways*)

HYMN No. 88 “*Fairest Lord Jesus*”

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,

O Thou of God and man the Son:

Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,

Thou my soul’s glory, joy and crown.

Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations!

Son of God and Son of Man!

Glory and honor, Praise, adoration,

Now and forevermore be Thine!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Gracious God, we thank you that we can rest in you, secure amid the conflict and confusion of life. We thank you that you provide for our needs and that you have trusted us to one another’s care. Free us to receive with humility and to give with joy. Open our hands to share what we have without fear of tomorrow. Anoint your people as peace-makers and justice-makers, that one day humanity may choose bread over weapons and fairness over greed. Amen

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up

and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,

and you have healed me.

O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,

restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,

and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment;

his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”

By your favor, O LORD,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:

“What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!”

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

2 King 5:1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease.” So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, “Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.”

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease.” When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.” But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to 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’?” So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the

Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

SERMON

Naaman is a man of war, a decorated military leader who's used to having the president take his calls on the first try. He doesn't have to stand in line for anything or anybody. People stand in line for him, waiting for a moment of his time, ready to do his bidding, hoping to catch his attention and garner his favor. He's a man of power and privilege, with an entourage of servants and soldiers alike at his beck and call. For all of the things and people Naaman can control, there is one thing he can't control or cure or banish, and that's the ailment that is attacking his skin. The one who commands armies and saves a nation on the battlefield is powerless in the face of a disease that torments him during the day, that keeps him awake at night, and that undercuts him every time he puts on his uniform and stands in front of his men. Whether others can see his ailment or not, he knows it's there and hates it for the power it holds over him, the power to make him a social outcast.

Naaman is a man of war, skilled in battle and confident in leading his troops. While it may be lost on us, it would have been excruciatingly clear to the earliest readers of this text that Naaman fought for the king of Aram, Israel's enemy, the one who took advantage of their weakness after King Ahab's death, whose troops ravaged their lands. Old Testament scholar Daniel Hawk described the situation when he wrote, "Naaman... commands the forces that have brought violence, loss of life, homes, and livelihood, and untold suffering to the people of Israel. Naaman is an individual who, we may assume, is feared and hated by the Israelite populace." (*Working Preacher* commentary for July 3, 2022)

On one of his recent raids into Israeli territory, some of Naaman's men seized captives who for one reason or another caught their attention. Among them was a young girl who was brought back and left to serve Naaman's wife. One day, aware of the commander's agony, the girl decided to approach her mistress and quietly say how she wished he was with the prophet in Samaria; surely he would cure him of his leprosy. Anybody care to speculate why she would speak up and suggest healing and relief for her captor and the warlord that's tormenting her people? Just as curious is why her mistress would listen carefully and then pass along the suggestion to Naaman. And why he, in turn, would take the idea to his lord, the king of Aram. A young, nameless slave with roots in the enemy's camp tossing out an idea that gets the attention of the commander and then is carried to the king... Maybe desperate times really do call for desperate measures. Then again, when you get right down to it, what did he have to lose?

Naaman went directly to the king of Aram and told him what the girl had said, and then the king sent him off with his blessing and a letter of introduction. Naaman traveled in his usual extravagant style, and with no small amount of fanfare and lavish gifts including ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of the latest in summer fashions. Upon arrival, he presents himself to the king of Israel, who reads the letter from his colleague down the road, who remember has been pillaging villages and carrying young girls off into slavery. The note says, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." At which point, the king simultaneously panics and explodes, saying: who does he think I am, God, dealing out death and life, that he expects me to cure a man of his leprosy? Clearly, he's just trying to pick a fight with me so he has an excuse to come racing back in here with his army.

The king is about to say, I'll have nothing to do with it - you can't set this trap for me, when Elisha intervenes and sends the king his own message: don't get your shorts all tied in a knot. Take three deep breaths and relax. And then send him to me, so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel. A few moments later, Naaman and all his horses and chariots and entourage pull up in front of Elisha's house. While they are waiting for the prophet to make his appearance, a messenger comes out - which is the

first insult. Naaman is an important man, and the first thing any prophet ought to know is that this is no time to send a messenger. Naaman has gone pretty far out on a limb just coming here, and the least the prophet can do is speak to him directly. Elisha's audacity has Naaman's back up, but that's nothing compared to his reaction when the messenger relays Elisha's message: Naaman is told to go down to the Jordan River and wash himself 7 times, and then he will be cleansed and healed and free to go on his way.

To Naaman's ears that is ridiculous, so in his best general's voice, he tells Elisha and the rest of Israel exactly what he thinks. Who do you think you are to send a scruffy little messenger to convey your suggestions to me? I expect you to come out here now, stand in front of me, call on the name of the Lord your God who you put so much stock in, wave your arms, do a dance and cure my leprosy. We have rivers at home in Damascus that are better than any old Jordan River you have to offer - I could have taken a bath there and not wasted my time coming down here to see you.

Naaman is poised to stomp off in a huff when his servants approach him - cautiously, I presume, and say, Uh, sir, if the prophet commanded you to do something difficult, you would do it, right? Why not go ahead now and do what he says, even if it is just "wash and be clean"? So Naaman did as he was told: he went to the river, he immersed himself 7 times, perhaps feeling a bit more foolish with each dunk. But when he rose up out of the water the 7th and final time, his skin was as fresh and soft and pure as a baby's - and he was truly clean and whole. And then we're told that it wasn't just Naaman's flesh that was healed, but also his soul. He went back to God's servant and said, Now I believe. Indeed there is no other God but the one God here in Israel; please accept my present. Elisha refuses the offered gift: you have just received an act of grace, not a service you can compensate with a fee. Then Naaman asks if he can at least take some of Israel back to Damascus with him, two mule-loads of earth, upon which he can give thanks to the One who washed him clean. At which point Elisha sends him off, saying simply, go in peace.

I've loved this story for a long time, in large part because of the simplicity of Naaman's healing. Much like him, we look for displays of power, signs of brilliance, walls of credentials, the rigor of treatment procedures before we dare even hope, much less expect to see things change. But that's not where Naaman found healing; he found it in the simple act of taking a bath. Or more importantly, he found it in following instructions, even when they sounded ridiculously silly and simple. Debie Thomas tells it this way: "Take off your armor, God essentially tells Naaman. Yes, all of it. Yes, even though people are watching. Now step into that muddy water. Yes, it smells. Yes, you'll have to stoop down. Yes, it's tepid. In you go. All the way in? Good. Now wash. Okay, wash again. Now wash *again*. And again and again and again and again. Wash until your need to buy or earn or impress or demand or manipulate or control your way into my healing presence is washed downriver for good. Let all of that hardship go. Choose the easy thing." ("Choosing What is Easy", *Journey with Jesus*, 30 June 2019)

No, I don't actually think stripping away our armor and making ourselves humble and vulnerable is really all that easy, but when it comes to meeting God, it's more than worth it. And despite all of his assumptions and biases to the contrary, it was precisely without his armor and in the simplicity of bathing in the dirty old Jordan that Naaman found, not just healing, but also God. There's such grace and good news in this story and the gift that it brings.

This year, as I've read it and read what others have to say about it, I've also been struck by the string of reversals that are at work here. In this story, the powerful and mighty have nothing to offer but attitude and arrogance; the king of Israel, the king of Aram and the war hero look to power and privilege and come up empty. Wisdom comes from those with no names and no authority: the young slave girl points Naaman in the direction of hope, and his servants intervene when he's inclined to collect up his toys and stomp off, and convince him to at least give the bath remedy a try. The disenfranchised and

powerless, the insignificant and disadvantaged are the ones tapped by God to point Naaman in the direction of healing. The high and mighty enemy is laid bare by his need, and becomes the unlikely recipient of God's healing grace. We may excel at drawing lines that separate us from those we think of as the "other", but this story – like so many in scripture – encourages us to recognize that any person may have important insights and be an instrument of God's saving work; every person can hide wounds and scars, emptiness and need. Man of war and slave stolen in battle, rich and powerful and one who sleeps on the street, well-established and newly arrived immigrant, high placed manager and invisible worker doing essential work. You just never know who carries what. All we can truly know is that God is present in and working through each.

Finally, let me share a "Prayer Reflection" on this text, written by Katherine Hawker.

a little girl

an army commander

a religious zealot

for one brief moment

difference suspended

doubt superseded

ordinary water

simple ritual

extraordinary presence

May we have the courage of the child
to reach out to even the powerful.

May we have the wisdom of Naaman
to ask for help when we are lost.

May we have the faithfulness of Elisha
to love outside the lines. (<http://liturgyoutside.net/>)

HYMN No. 68 *"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"*
There's a wideness in God's mercy Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader Than the measure of our minds;
And the heart of the Eternal Is most wonderfully kind.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Gratitude from Alice and Geoff for prayers; Nathan has had his last visit with neurologist near hospital and will now follow up with doctors close to home; cleared to go back to work July 23; Alice and Geoff returning to FL this month

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, as our country's birthday cycles around again, we give you thanks for all that is good and exemplary about our land and our life together. We celebrate the broad expanse of territory that ranges from rocky coast land and sandy beaches to everglades and glaciers, from potato fields and redwood forests to desert cactus and vast underground reserves of minerals and gems. We give thanks for our founders who dared to imagine the bold experiment that is democracy, and a life together organized around such principles as equality, inalienable rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We give thanks for a land where people of all faiths and no faith can come together as one; for the rich heritage that is ours because immigrants from all over the world made their home here, found shelter and sought opportunity, bringing traditions and cultures with them, adding color and spice, dance and song for all

to enjoy. We celebrate the notion that each one has a voice and a vote, that together – north, south, east and west, rich and poor, young and old, skilled with the hands as well as the mind, artist and laborer, scientist and farmer, miner and engineer, doctor and teacher – together, we become a people. And together we care for each other, volunteer our time, give of our selves, share what we have.

Loving and holy God, there is so much for which we are thankful and by which we are blessed. And at the same time, it is painfully clear to us that all is not well in our country, and so we come to you in search of healing and wisdom, courage and compassion. We pray for the divisions that separate us from each other, for rhetoric that erects walls and creates camps, for a tendency to point fingers and assign blame rather than come together in search of new alternatives. We confess our reticence to acknowledge the consequences of our actions on others, the apathy that asks why we should care; our longing for quick fixes and easy answers and our reluctance to do the hard work of encouraging cooperation and fostering reconciliation, honoring differences and healing centuries old wounds of racism. Open our ears and hearts to listen eagerly to another person's story, and tell us when to open our mouths and speak a word of truth. Lead us as we seek an end to the violence that intrudes in far too many places, claiming lives and shattering every day activities. Pour out your wisdom and courage on those in positions of leadership that they might truly lead. Move among us that each of us and all of us may come to see the role we can play, the difference we can make, especially when guided and empowered by you.

We bring before you all those in need of healing and hope, of food and shelter, of safety and peace. Pour out your mercy on those battling wild fires, recovering from disasters, picking through the rubble of what used to be home; on the people of Ukraine and Russia, communities across Europe opening homes and hearts to refugees, and those starving in Sudan as even relief rations are dwindling and hope disappearing. Hold us, guide us, lead us, bless us. And hear us, as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

We have been richly blessed by a God who loves us far beyond our deserving, who lavishes goodness and mercy upon us simply because it is God's nature to be so very generous. Let us return a portion of those blessings to build up God's church and God's work in the world; let us use what we have and who we are to share love and spread kindness, and to make God's presence felt in places of need and want.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Eternal God, we bring you our gifts because we know that our life and all human life rightfully belong to you and that everything we have we hold in trust from you. We praise you for everything you have done for the world in Jesus Christ. Help us, through him, to make our own offering complete by living in obedience to you. Amen. *(Chalice Worship)*

HYMN No. 572 *"America, the Beautiful"*

O beautiful for spacious skies, For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties Above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed His grace on thee.

And crown Thy good with brotherhood From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet, Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat Across the wilderness!
America! America! God mend Thine every flaw,
Confirm Thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!

BENEDICTION

So now we leave this time of worship. And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain, the path constantly changing, we know some things that are as solid and sure as the ground beneath our feet, and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.

We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is here, found in the space between all things, closer to us than our next breath, binding us to each other, until we meet we again,

Go in peace. Amen.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)