

PERMISSION TO COMPROMISE

2 Kings 5:1-19

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, July 3, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

In today's passage, during the eighth century BCE, the people of Israel and the people of Aram (modern day Syria) were off and on pitted against one another in battle. During a time in which they were not fighting one another, the commander of the Syrian army, a man named Naaman, was looking for a way to cure a skin ailment that he had. A servant of his suggested he travel to Israel to see a prophet named Elisha. Naaman does so, and Elisha tells him to immerse himself seven times in the River Jordan.

In the sermon, I will expand on what I have just summarized, but the core of the text on which I want to preach picks up at this point, at 2 Kings 5, verse 14. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

We are in a summer sermon series on Old Testament prophets, colorful and intense people who serve as spokespersons for God in their day and time, a role that often gets them into trouble or glory or both.

- We have seen Elijah fleeing for his life from the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and find strength and rekindling of his prophetic work as he experienced the presence of God not through earthquake, wind, or fire, but through a still, small voice, the sound of silence.
- We have seen Elisha succeed Elijah as the latter is transported to the heavens in a chariot of fire – one of two people in the Bible (Enoch being the other) to enter into the holiest of places without having to pass through death; and we have seen Elisha pick up the mantle Elijah left behind and succeed him in his work, while the music of Vangelis – who himself died a few weeks ago – rings in the ears of those of us who went to the movies in the early 1980s.¹

Next week, we turn to less biography and more speeches or oracles of prophets, first with Amos for two weeks in then with Isaiah for two weeks in August. But today we have story from the Elijah/Elisha cycle.

Lord: May the words that come from my mouth honor you even a smidgeon as much as those words we have read from ancient texts which, though mystifying to us, are your Word for us. May it be so in this strange story today. Amen.

¹ The movie *Chariots of Fire*, whose soundtrack featured an instrumental piece of the same name by Vangelis.

I.

Naaman is a highly-decorated military commander serving the King of Aram, which is present day Syria. Aram is one of the nations which has periodically fought and defeated the people of Israel.² The narrator attributes these victories on the part of *Syria* as part of the work of *God*.³ While Naaman is not mentioned as the commanding officer during those victories, the medals on his uniform bear witness to the many victories he has led.

While there is a lull in the fighting between Syria and Israel, Naaman wants to address the one drawback to his life, the one blemish on his otherwise stellar resume: a skin condition generically known as leprosy, which holds him back but does not seem to debilitate him.

In one of his raids against Israel, Naaman's troops have captured a young girl whom Naaman has taken into his home to be a servant to his wife. Though a prisoner of war, when the young servant realizes Naaman wants a cure for his skin disease, she says to Naaman's wife: "If only he knew the prophet in Samaria! He could cure his leprosy."

This prophet is Elisha.

Naaman goes to the King of Syria to ask if he may go to Israel to consult with Elisha. The King says: "By all means, I'll even send a letter and gifts."

When the King of Israel receives the letter, he suspects that it is a *ruse* to get Naaman into the country to attack Israel again.

But Elisha the Prophet hears about the King's reaction and says: "Send Naaman to me."

So Naaman comes with full military retinue to Elisha's house and stands at the door. Elisha must be watching a soccer game, for he sends his own servant to the door with a message for Naaman: "Tell him to go wash seven times in the Jordan River and he'll be fine."

Naaman is livid.

He starts to walk away and tells his servants:

I thought *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 on my skin and *cure* the leprosy!

Besides [Naaman adds], we have the most *beautiful* and *fertile* rivers in Damascus. Why would I want to come to *Israel* and wash in this muddy little rivulet they call the Jordan River?

But this time it is one of *Naaman's servants* who speaks up:

Look, we have come all this way [the servant says]. If the Man of God had told you something *difficult* to do, wouldn't you have done it? Just because it is *easy* doesn't mean it won't work. What is there to *lose*? Go ahead and bathe in the Jordan.

² I Kings 20:1-34; 22:1-40.

³ In addition to be stated in our passage at 5:1, this attribution is also evident in I Kings 22:19-23.

So Naaman obliges his servant, and lo and behold, when he emerges from the water his flesh is like that of a young boy. Naaman is moved to say:

Now I *know* that there is *no* God over *all the earth* except the *God of Israel*.

As Naaman prepares to return to Syria – with smooth skin and a converted heart – he makes two requests of Elisha:

- First, Naaman says: “Please let me take back two mule-loads of earth from Israel...”
- Second, Naaman says to Elisha: “Please pardon me *in advance* on one count. Whenever the King of Syria goes into the Temple of Rimmon on a state procession, I will be at his side. And just as the King will bow down to worship Rimmon, I will also bow down to worship my former god. It would simply be too much for the nation to bear if the King worships one god and his military commander another. May the Lord *pardon* me on this *one* count.”

To this request the Prophet Elisha says: “Go in peace.”

II.

What might these two requests say to us on this weekend when we celebrate the 246th anniversary of our independence from the British – in a worship service led by a British choir? Only in America. Only at Westminster.

(a)

First, the two “mule-loads” of dirt: Why the *soil* from Israel that Naaman wants to take with him when he returns home to Syria?

Naaman likely thinks that – like the other gods with which he is familiar from his upbringing – the God of Israel is a *tribal* god, a god belonging *only* to the people of *Israel*, a god who can be worshipped only on *Israel’s soil*.⁴

- Thus, Naaman may have wanted to take the soil with him to Syria so he can spread a bit of it in front of his altar and literally stand on it when he is worshipping the God of his new faith, the God of Israel. He may feel that he has to stand on the *soil* of Israel to worship the *God* of Israel.
- On a more personal level, Naaman may have planned to place some of the soil from Israel in his shoes when he commanded troops, or slide a pouch of the soil into his pocket, hoping to protect himself in battle, much like centuries later soldiers would protect themselves from a bullet’s trajectory by binding a Bible close to their heart.
- Perhaps Naaman senses that the soil of Israel somewhere on his person will remind him that he is with God *all* the time and that God is with him *all* the time, even when Naaman isn’t physically in Israel.⁵

We can identify with this *instinct* in Naaman. How many of us wear a *cross* around our neck, an *inscription* inside a ring, a small *Bible* tucked into a handbag or a handwritten on a yellowed slip of paper tucked into an inside pocket of our briefcase? – all as reminders that we *belong* to God, that God is *with* us all the time, even

⁴ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 20013), 532n.

⁵ Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 754.

when we are *alone* in a foreign land or *alone* among people close and familiar. There is nothing wrong with “mule loads” of earth if they remind us that God is *with* us and we are *with* God.

But it does seem Naaman has not yet come to realize fully the words he spoke when he came up from the River Jordan – skin smooth and cleansed. Naaman had said that the God he now worships is “the *only* God in *all* the earth.” The core of Naaman’s conversion is from worshipping the gods of rain and thunder and storm and harvest (known as polytheism) to worshipping one God who is God of all people in all times and places (known as monotheism). Naaman’s newfound faith – not yet quite instilled as second nature to him – is that one does not have to reside in Israel or any other place to worship and serve this God.

What this shows, among other things, is that even after bathing in the River Jordan and being healed, Naaman’s faith is still being formed. His understanding of “the wideness of God’s mercy” is still expanding. His is “faith seeking understanding.” Naaman doesn’t need a mule-load of dirt to remind him of God’s presence, but it does, bring the dirt on!

(b)

Naaman’s second request is *clearer* at the outset. He asks Elisha to be pardoned when as part of his military duty he must bow down to the god Rimmon in a state ceremony. It would cause needless speculation among the citizenry if the King bowed down in the Temple of Rimmon and the military commander standing next to him did not. Bowing down is integral to Naaman’s responsibility to his nation. He feels he should continue to do it, even though it does not reflect his new understanding of God.

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When I began my ministry in West Texas, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Amarillo, about 250 miles further west, was led by a Bishop who grew up in the area named LeRoy T. Matthieson. An important part of the Amarillo economy was provided by the Pantex plant, a secret facility in which were manufactured all of the nation’s nuclear warheads at the time.

In 1982, a man in his fifties who had worked at the plant for seventeen years began to worry, as a faithful Roman Catholic, that working at the plant might be morally wrong, since his bishop was part of an international movement advocating a freeze on nuclear weapons by the United States and the then Soviet Union.

The worker went to see the Bishop. Despite the Bishop’s stand against nuclear weapons, he advised the worker to remain in his job, since he was nearing retirement and had many dependents. But the Bishop had called for all the workers to examine their consciences. As a result, a few did leave their jobs at the plant. The citizens of the community were outraged. United Way pulled its funding of Catholic relief services out of concern that people who stopped giving to United Way because of the bishop’s position would not leave sufficient funding for other agencies. It was not an easy time for the workers, their families, the Bishop, the Catholic Church, the community of Amarillo, and the social service organizations caught in between.⁶ Discerning when to compromise, and when not to, is never easy.

When Naaman requests a pardon from Elisha, Elisha does not *tell* Naaman what to do. He simply says, “Go in peace.” Elisha doesn’t *command* compromise; he simply *permits* it. Like the Bishop, Elisha leaves the decision up to Naaman and promises the peace and presence of God as he makes it. “Go in peace.”

⁶ *The New York Times* 3/21/1982.

III.

My friends, in our Presbyterian tradition and in our nation, we are *permitted* to compromise but not *commanded* to do so. As people of faith and citizens of the nation at this fractious point in our history, I believe we should ask, in our own way, what Naaman the Syrian asked in his own way:

- When does compromise serve the common good?
- When does it approach God's will as I understand God's will?
- Are these two – the common good and God's will – in approximate alignment?
- If they are not in alignment, with which shall I compromise?
- How do I express my spirit of compromise?
- How do I live into my choice?

I know that even if two people in the same congregation – or even the same household – ask these questions, they will sometimes come to different answers. Nothing is foolproof. Nothing is easy.

But as we seek such wisdom concerning what to do, where and when to do it as Christians and as citizens, we have the promise of soil – “mule-loads of soil” – as a reminder that the *giver* and *maker* of *soil* is the Lord of us all. Of us *all*.

Amen.

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