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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/14/2007, Pentecost 20C, Lectionary 28
2 Kings 5:1-15c, Luke 17:11-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little maid from the land of Israel, and she waited on Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." (2 Kings 5:2-3)

God bless this little maid! Let us not underestimate what the young ones can do. And you young ones in this congregation: do not doubt but that you can do something great in the name of the Lord.

It is an awful thing to be carried off from home by raiders, yet this child remains kind-hearted and proves to be a wonderful blessing in the life of her master. Indeed, this child anticipates the good news we also see in this morning's Gospel lesson, for she bears witness to her Syrian master that our God loves the leper too. Just as surely as Jesus heals the ten lepers in our Gospel story, so it is that the heart of our God overleaps the kinds of national and medical boundaries that ordinarily separate the people of earth. This child from long ago seemed to know that already. In her innocence, she simply bursts forth with the good news: If my master will go to my homeland, there is a prophet there he will cure him of his leprosy!

We do not know the age of this maid when she was stolen from home, but in her kindness to her captors she is ancient kin to one of the saints of the church. I am speaking of St. Patrick, missionary to Ireland. Patrick was born in what is now Scotland (387 AD), but back then was part of Roman Britain. When Patrick was about sixteen years old, he was captured by Irish raiders and made a slave to an Irish chieftain. He served as a shepherd for that chieftain for six years before escaping and returning home, where he devoted himself to the church, prepared for the priesthood, and in time returned to Ireland to bring Christianity to the very land where he had suffered cruel slavery. Thus, Patrick blessed the very people who had enslaved him. And so it was that long before Patrick, this little maid from

Israel blessed the very people who had enslaved her.

I remember my boys when they were sixteen. It would have broken my heart to have lost them to Irish raiders. So, it is for slaves the world over: the dignity of human freedom is stolen from them, they are bent to the whims of others, the hearts of their families back home are broken, and who could blame the heart of the slave from drifting into despair and bitterness.

But not Patrick, and not this child in the service of Naaman. Torn away from mother and father, she was thereby set free of mother and father, and so, she could have lived any sort of life she could get away with. And she could have believed or not believed in any god she wanted. But she remembers the faith of her parents, and in her innocence and her sweetness, she pities her foreign master and directs him to the true source of hope and health in this world: the God of Israel, the God of the Church.

Many of you in this congregation are like this maiden child: You are separated now from mother and father, home and kin, and here you are in this sometimes bewildering, sometime pagan city. May I ask: How are you doing? You wanderers from the Midwest and from the South and from the various reaches of our land, how are you doing on your own in this town? You grown-ups, no longer tied to the apron strings of dear old mother and father: how are you doing on your own here in New York City? You might have longed for freedom — liberty to live any manner of life that seems right to you. Now you have your freedom. How are you doing?

I, for one, can testify in your defense that in many ways you are doing well, for here you are, in church, drawing near to the same Christ Jesus

that Mom and Dad might be worshiping too at this hour back home across America. And for us older ones in the congregation, though mother and father might have passed on to the nearer presence of God, we remember their faith, we walk in their paths, and we are worshiping the same Christ that they can see now with even greater clarity and greater joy.

All we children of Eve, exiled as we are from the Garden of Eden, forced to earn our living by the sweat of our brow, but free to live for God or to turn away from him: how are we doing? How goes it with your soul?

Strangers and wayfarers on earth that we are, I think we can learn a thing or two about how to live in a strange land from this little maid of Israel. I think that we can learn even more from another child of Israel – Jesus of Nazareth – for if ever there was a person who left his native land behind and befriended the strange people of another land, such a one is Jesus.

But let's begin with the Naaman's little maid from Israel. From her, I think we can learn three rules for living away from home:

- 1) Be kind to the new people in your life, even though they might treat you like a slave, and even though they might worship other gods.
- 2) Do not forget home, nor the faith of your childhood.
- 3) As you are able, bring the new people in your life to your God, as this child brought Naaman to the LORD.

So, let's develop these points one by one. First, be kind to the people in your life, though they might treat you as a slave and though their beliefs, including their religious beliefs, might be quite different from your own.

Such was the condition of this little maid from Israel. Mother and father, sister and brother, were now lost to her. As far as we know, she never got back home again. Against her will, she was set in the midst of a new people. We know little about her mistress, but we know quite a lot about her master, Naaman, and what we know is, shall we say, ambiguous. She serves a man who is no saint. In fact, he is a powerful enemy of this girl's people, he is impulsive, inclined toward rage, and strangely pliable, liable

to be led around by his own servants. That is, he is a man, a human being much like other human beings. He might have been nothing much to brag about, yet she was kind to him.

In being kind to him, this maid was being kind to an enemy of her people, and not just any enemy, but a powerful one, for Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Syria. Furthermore, Naaman was a victorious commander and was known as a mighty man of valor. He was a leading soldier, then, of the very nation that had raided Israel and taken the girl captive. Talk about returning good for evil, that is what this girl did. Naaman was a leper, and though he was part of the establishment of this girl's oppressing nation, nonetheless, this girl loved easily, even her enemy, and so she simply blurted out, "My God can cure you of your leprosy." She did not barter. She did not negotiate some reward for herself before telling Naaman about the possibility of being cured. No, she let it be known, in her heartfelt way, that her master could be cured by the God of Israel.

Now, you before me, you might have a Naaman in your life. He might be your boss, he might be your neighbor, he might be your father-in-law. His background is different, his social-economic class is different, his schools were better, he certainly is more powerful than you, and his faith is different from yours. You are in his hands. How shall you treat him? Naturally, you must treat him with enough respect to keep your job. But should you go beyond that? What about your manner of speech concerning Naaman when he is not there? Do you cut him? When you are safe from him, do you mock him? If we would follow the example of the maid of Israel, we will be kind to Naaman — strange man that he is.

The second thing we learn from this child is to remember your faith, even when you have been cut off from home and family and all those things that make faith easier. So it was with this girl. Off in Syria, there were no temples for the divine sacrifice to the LORD. There were no synagogues for learning the Word of the LORD. There were no mother and father to gather her up and bring her to church. No, she is alone in a strange land with strange beliefs. But she does not forget. Her master suffers. She does not point

him to the gods of Syria. She does not refer him to the priests of Syria. She makes no mention of the prophets of that land, but rather, hastens to speak of the Lord of her youth. She believes in the God who rescued the Israelites from slavery down there in Egypt. And so this slave child points her master to the One who can save: the God of Israel, the God of the Church.

And third, among the kindnesses this child showed toward her master and mistress, there was this great kindness too: she bore witness to her faith, and thereby managed to bring her master to this same faith.

We do not know how long it took the girl to bring her testimony of faith. Who could blame her for lying low for a while and speaking nothing of Israel. But she did not lie low forever, and in this, she is a giant of faith. There came a time, there came the right occasion, when it simply seemed right to speak of the LORD, and she did so. Maybe while working in the kitchen, maybe while waiting on table, she found herself alone with her mistress and found it fitting to say what was on her heart: My God can heal my master.

It is not always the proper season for you to be trying to draw others to Christ, lest you actually drive them away through ill-timed testimony. And yet, when the time does come your way when it is right to speak, do so, and in the doing, you might prove a tremendous blessing in the life of someone who without you, will be left to soldier on in this world without much hope.

Especially give your testimony in that happy circumstance where your integrity has caught the attention of someone else. “Why are you so good? Why are you so honest?” “Well, let me tell you. I am trying to live for Jesus.”

I like this little maid of Israel because she is an early disciple of Jesus, as it were, though she lived long before Jesus. Nonetheless, it is as if she is following in the footsteps of Jesus. She is following his example. I mean, Jesus leaves behind the realms of glory and comes to the realms of sin and sickness. He leaves behind the angels and the archangels and the whole host of heaven, along with their beautiful Sanctus, and he comes to earth where he mingles with sinners and lepers and suffering folk of all kinds. And what does he do for these strange people — so very unlike the heavenly host? He heals them. He sends them to the priests, and in the going, they become whole. He forgives them. He looks at the soldiers crucifying him and he prays for them. “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” In his weariness, he hears the crowds cursing him, but he does not curse in return. And when he spies a way to help, like the maid of Israel spying a way to help her master, then he dashes to it, though it means dashing to the Cross.

This is the kind of Saviour we have. To this very day, he is willing to live in a world so very different from heaven, and he is willing to be surrounded by people so very different from the heavenly host. But when he sees us coming toward him now in the Blessed Sacrament, strange and lowly and in need as we are, he blurts out to us as did the little maid of Israel long ago: “I can help you. Indeed, I can give my life for you.”

To such a Saviour be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.