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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/9/2016, The 21st Sunday after Pentecost, 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.

My main text this morning is the story of the Syrian army general Naaman. We will see as we go along in this story that the heroes are the little ones of the story. We shall read of kings and generals and diplomatic protocol, but it is the maid and the servants who guide this story along to success. Let us begin with the first verse of our reading from 2 Kings 5:

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of *Syria*, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. (2 Kings 5:1, RSV)

This story begins in Syria. Nowadays, Syria is a sad and suffering land. There is a substantial article in Wikipedia that can serve as an introduction to the story of the Syrian Civil War.¹ Even a glance at the table of main belligerents reveals that the people of Syria are being swept over by a multitude of warring interests. The government of Syria and a host of allies, including Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, are fighting against a confederation of Syrian Arab rebel groups, with support from the United States and groups from various Middle Eastern countries. Millions of people have been left homeless. Millions have become refugees. Just this past Monday, the United States and Russia broke off diplomatic talks to end the bloodshed in Syria.² So, nowadays Syria is a chaotic and anguished land.

But in the ancient days of this morning's Bible story, Syria is doing well. There is a king in charge and a highly regarded commander of the army. Syria has known victory, including victories over Israel.

The highly regarded Syrian general is named Naaman. He can be praised in many ways, but he is ill. The Bible puts it this way: "He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper" (2 Kings 5:1). His affliction is incurable except for a miracle.

Next we read of a "little maid." She is the first of the little ones who are the heroes of this story. She waits on Naaman's wife. She is a Jewish girl, whisked away from home by a Syrian raid. Such an event could break the spirit of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_civil_war

² <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-us-russia-syria-20161003-snap-story.html>

many a person, but not this one. Her heart seems sweet and helpful. So, she notes her master's leprosy and suggests to her mistress that there is a prophet in Israel who could heal Naaman. She means the prophet Elisha.

If the story had proceeded in an ordinary, human way, Naaman would have spoken to the maid and, if his hopes had been lifted by her, he would have thanked her and would have traveled to Israel to speak with the prophet Elisha. But that is not how this story goes. Naaman goes not to the prophet but to his king, and from that point on, the story becomes an international incident.

I can understand this, I guess. The seminary from which Carol and I graduated was the Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary. It so happened that President Eisenhower retired to Gettysburg, not far from the Seminary. We used to drive by the lane leading back to his farm. I remember being astonished to read once that President Eisenhower, even in retirement, did not drive his own car. I love to drive, and so the thought of not being able to drive your own car was rather dreadful to me. For all I know, the President did not balance his checkbook either. But that is the way things go for important people. There are protocols guiding their conduct.

So it was with Naaman. I imagine that the chief commander of Syria's armies cannot make a private visit to a foreign land. He must follow proper rules. So he goes to his king. His king, in turn, loads Naaman down with gifts for the king of Israel and writes a letter to that king, asking the king of Israel to heal Naaman. What happened to Elisha? What we have now are diplomatic relations between kings – one of whom has no idea why he is being asked to heal Naaman. Nor can he do such a thing. It drives him to despair with worry about the possibility of war.

At this point Elisha steps forward to get things back on track. He sends word to the king of Israel to send Naaman to him. Naaman comes, and is offended that Elisha does not even come out of his house to greet him. Elisha simply sends a messenger with instructions that Naaman should wash seven times in the Jordan River.

At first, Naaman refuses to do this. But now, the second group of little ones guide the story the rest of the way to success. They reason with the great man. They point out that if Elisha had asked Naaman to do some great deed, he would have tried to do so. So why not do a humble deed? Why not wash seven times in the Jordan River? Naaman does so, and he is healed. His flesh becomes healthy and fresh, like that of a little child. Naaman, then, becomes a worshiper of the God of Israel.

It is the lowly ones of earth who bring salvation here.

Let us not underestimate what the lowly ones of our earth can do. The Bible seems to delight in the accomplishments of the lowly ones. It is a shepherd boy, for example, who defeats the mighty warrior Goliath. David is so young that he cannot even move with all the armor laid upon him. He sets

it aside... takes off the bronze helmet, removes the coat of mail, lays down the sword (1 Samuel 17:38-39). He goes forward to face the fierce giant bearing only the tools of a humble workingman. He takes his staff in his hand, brings along his sling, and stops to pick up some stones along the way. With such humble things, he defeats the great enemy of Israel and wins some peace for his people.

Think also of Mary, the mother of our Lord. In her *Magnificat*, she acknowledges something that is simply the plain truth. She is one of the lowly ones of our earth:

⁴⁶And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, ⁴⁷And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. ⁴⁸For he hath regarded *the low estate* of his handmaiden: (Luke 1:46-48, KJV)

Mary is happy because her lowliness does not prevent Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, from seeing her. The Lord “has regarded” her. Mary sings of our God’s heart, how it inclines downward toward the humble ones. It is as Psalm 138 says:

Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly... (Psalm 138:6, KJV)

There would have been a political advantage, I bet, in the Christ Child being born in a palace, the son of a princess. It would have gotten the story off to a strong start. If Jesus had wealth and royalty in his background, maybe the world would have heeded him more. But, no, the Christ Child was born to someone like the little maid who helped saved the great general Naaman. Jesus was born to Mary — not to a princess.

Likewise in the Bible, the apostles are not leading citizens of the land. They are not mighty warriors or learned scholars. They are fishermen from the marshes and waters of Galilee. But with these lowly folk, Christ has conquered the world and many a heart.

So, the Bible is proud of the lowly and thinks they can do great things. Let us, then, not underestimate what *we* can do, even if we should be or become lowly. The humble of the land can do great things. For one thing, there are a lot of us. Indeed, the true strength of a land includes the virtues of the lowly of the land. Think of the ordinary, uncelebrated, humble people of the land: if they be people of integrity, who are true to their words, who are willing to do an honest day’s labor for a day’s wages, who love their families with all their hearts, who love the people of their land through that old trait called “patriotism,” who can pour out their strength and their years trying to do good in their neighborhood, who can even conceive of giving their lives for

the sake of others as firefighters, police, and soldiers do... if a land has virtuous lowly people, then that land can be a great land.

In the end, the lowly rule! For in the end, is the lowly One, Jesus of Nazareth, who brings salvation to us.

Naturally, we can pity the ten lepers in this morning's Gospel story. But objectively speaking, Jesus is more lowly than they are. Their huts might have been humble and on the periphery of things, but Jesus did not even have a hut. Birds of the air have their nests and foxes have their dens, but Jesus had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). None of the ten lepers live in the shadow of the rugged cross. None of them are heading to Jerusalem to be rejected by the leading citizens of the land. Rejection is a hard thing to bear. In what are called the "passion predictions" of Jesus, our eye tends to focus on the words about death and the cross. But before Jesus speaks of being killed, he first speaks of being rejected:

And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, *and be rejected* of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31, KJV)

St. John says that Jesus came to his own people, and they would not have him. He says that Jesus made the world, but the world would not have him:

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. (John 1:10, KJV)

When Jesus ministers to the lepers, he is serving people who are like him – people who ultimately are rejected by humanity. At least these ten lepers could hope to live some measure more of years. But Jesus is a young man who is soon to die. Even if Jesus had not healed these lepers, they would probably outlive him. Jesus is like the maid and the servants in our Old Testament story. He is the kind of person others tended to overlook. But he is the lowly One through whom this world has hope of salvation.

You and I can never be so lowly that Jesus does not pay careful attention to us. If we be humble folk, we are right up his ally. And if we be high and mighty folk in this world, like Naaman of old, we can climb no higher in dignity than that we should humble ourselves for the sake of others, as does Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.