

6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 8, 2007

2 Kings 5: 1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6: 1-16; Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

“Ready or not – God is here!”

We began our worship this morning with a responsive call based on Psalm 30. In it we cried for help, sang praises to the Lord, prayed and gave thanks to God – just as the psalmist did millennia ago. The psalm is a hymn of God’s grace through which we sing out to all who will listen, “God lifts me up, establishes me as a strong mountain, clothes me, heals me, restores me to life. Depend on God to transform you as I have been transformed. Thanks be to God!”

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And Paul offers a similar message of grace in his letter to the churches in Galatia reminding them that they can take no credit for what God does. All behaviour has consequences but for Paul this is a statement of hope rather than judgment because we can be encouraged and restored by the spirit of gentleness that comes from Christ through the community of faith.

He goes on to say that a new creation is everything – following conventions, doing good works, obeying the law – all these are fine as far as they go, but ultimately everything fades in the hope of the cross. Paul writes in large, bold letters – all capitals – to emphasize his overarching message of God’s amazing grace through which we will know the peace and mercy of the Lord.

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Threads of God’s grace weave through all of our readings this morning creating rich images – a colourful tapestry of God’s abundance that embraces us with God’s grace over and over and over. Listen again to the story of Naaman:

Naaman is a key leader in his king’s army and enjoys a lavish lifestyle. He drives the latest chariot and has servants to attend his every wish. He is strong, smart, and financially secure – everyone must want to be him, right? – Wrong! Naaman has a serious skin condition – a disease that might cause him some medical problems. However, the real complications are social, religious, and moral – people with such “impurities” are stigmatized as ritually unclean and therefore excluded from many aspects of community life. Naaman, powerful general noted for his many triumphs cannot command good health.

It turns out that one of the servant’s in Naaman’s household is an Israelite who was captured in one of Naaman’s raids on Israel – one of his victims is the agent of good news in the story. She might be expected to hate her captor – instead she has compassion. The slave girl tells her mistress of a prophet in her home town that can cure Naaman. It is a measure of Naaman’s desperation that he acts on the information from this child, a servant, a slave, a foreigner.

The Syrian king uses what he perceives to be his considerable influence to ensure that the king in Israel takes Naaman seriously. An official letter is composed – that’s how these things are done – those in

power deal with others in power to accomplish what they desire. (But we will discover that this is not the way things work with God.)

Naaman sets off on his journey with attitude. He brings a tremendous gift from his king to influence the prophet to heal him – miraculous cures are expensive and it isn't as though everyone in Israel has welcome mats out for Syrian generals!

When Naaman and his entourage arrive and present their letter to the king in Israel, they are exhausted – road weary and dirty – longing for a clean bed, some food, some drink. They wait in the lobby while the king of Israel reads the letter and becomes increasingly distressed by its contents. He perceives a plot. The Syrians encamped at his door have come with an impossible request – he is not God after all! The king is sure that his failure to help will mean more violence and war. As he agonizes in the royal rooms the king receives a message that gets him off the hook – the prophet, Elisha, sends word that Naaman may come to him.

The king sends Naaman and company packing down the road to the prophet Elisha who barely acknowledges the mighty Syrian commander. He sends out a lowly servant to instruct Naaman that he is to go jump – into the River Jordan that is – not once but seven times!

Now Naaman thinks this is a bit humiliating. Wash in the river? That's it? Doesn't this prophet fellow know that there are cleaner, sweeter rivers in Damascus? He is displeased – angry even. He goes off in a snit muttering, then storming and ranting in the street – the cure should be more dramatic and difficult – more befitting his station.

Naaman's servant tries to placate him, "Um... excuse me sir, but why not try it? I mean, if the prophet had told you to climb the highest mountain seven days in a row and say your prayers, or roll a pebble on your hands and knees all the way back to Damascus, you would probably have done it, right? So why not this simple washing thing? What have you got to lose – your pride? Your life?"

So Naaman goes, washes in the River Jordan, and is healed.

This is a great and memorable story in which we may find ourselves – through which we may discern God's grace – grace that comes to Naaman the vulnerable human creature, not to Naaman the mighty warrior. In this story of God's grace it comes as a surprise that grace reaches even Naaman – but we never seem to be surprised by grace any more. We take it as a matter of course that grace should come to us – like we deserve it.

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The reading from Luke's gospel is also about God's grace. It is called The Mission of the Seventy and is an account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus calls together a group of people and sends them ahead with the good news – out into the world to participate in the Lord's work. They are sent *...like lambs into the midst of wolves*. They reach out in vulnerability to the surrounding culture – risking rejection, misunderstanding, and failure.

These first missionaries are given specific instructions about how to pack – take only what is essential – no frills – travel light! And he give precise directions about how to behave at each stopover too – offer peace, stay in one house rather than looking for the richest or most generous host, eat and drink

whatever you are given – even if it challenges your dietary restrictions. When you are welcomed, heal the sick. When you are rejected, leave as fast as you can, cleaning your feet as you go. **But in both cases say to the people, *the kingdom of God has come near.***

The missionaries are not to adapt their message to the warmth of the hospitality they receive – God does not adapt the offer of divine grace to our receptiveness and response. The message is always the same; *the kingdom of God has come near to you.* This is the key to the passage for me – the basic message is not contingent on the response. God’s grace is upon us – *ready or not* God is here! The kingdom of God has come despite our illpreparedness and our distrust and our anxiety – the kingdom of God has come in the face of our sin.

In the end, as the seventy missionaries marvel at their successful adventures, sharing stories and recounting details, they are reminded by Jesus of what is truly cause for rejoicing – their names are written in heaven – they have received God’s abundant grace. “Don’t rejoice because the spirits submitted, don’t feel self-righteous because of the sacrifice of time and talent, don’t get all excited because of anything you have done – jump for joy because of what God has done in and through you – go wild because God loves you – be thrilled and overcome by the gift of God’s grace.”

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Sometimes we try to make rules for grace – supposing that repentance or spiritual piety is necessary to receive grace. Grace comes, we think, to those who have faith or to those who believe what we believe. Some of us may think that grace comes only to the poor and oppressed. All of this is just an effort on our part to identify a precondition for grace, as if it were something that could be earned and justified.

There are no rules for grace. Naaman does not merit grace for a moment but it comes to him anyway. Grace is elusive – it slips through our fingers as we try to grasp it. Frederick Buechner says that *grace is something you can never get but only be given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.*¹

Jesus focuses the attention of the seventy who participate in his mission on the gift of grace that is offered to them and through them to all whom they encounter. Some reach out and grab it, others let it slip through their fingers, their minds, their hearts. No matter what they do the gift is for them – is offered even to those who initially reject it. God’s grace is for Naaman and for the psalmist and for us – for the newborn, troubled churches in Galatia as much as for the Knox community of faith – for those who are welcoming and unwelcoming alike *the kingdom of God has come near.*

God’s grace does not belong to us and it cannot be safely predicted. No matter what we do to box God into our narrow idea of who God is – no matter how often we claim to know who is or is not acceptable in the eyes of God – the box is never strong enough to hold in the amazing grace of our Lord! **Amen.**

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¹ Buechner, F. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC.*