

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany; January 29, 2023

2 Kings 5:1-15a

“Look Deeper”

Na’aman, the commander of the king of Aram’s army, was a great man in the opinion of his master. He was highly honored because the LORD had provided victory for Aram through him. Although he was a powerful warrior, he had leprosy.

Raiding parties had once gone out from Aram and brought back a young girl. She served Na’aman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “I wish my master stood before the prophet who is in Samaria, because he would cure him of his leprosy.”

So Na’aman went and told his master what the servant girl from the land of Israel had said.

Then the king of Aram said, “Go there. I will send a letter to the king of Israel.” So Na’aman went, and he took ten talents of silver and six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. Then he took the letter to the king of Israel. The letter said, “Now, when you receive this letter, you will know that I am sending my officer Na’aman to you so that you can cure him of his leprosy.”

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothing and said, “Am I God that I can kill and make alive? Why is he sending a man to me for me to heal him from his leprosy? See how he is looking for a pretext to fight against 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, and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.”

So Na’aman went with his horses and chariots and stopped in front of the door of Elisha’s house. But Elisha sent a messenger out to him to say, “Go and wash seven times in the Jordan. Then your flesh will be restored and you will be clean.”

But Na’aman was angry and he left, saying, “Look, I said to myself, ‘He will certainly come out and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God and wave his hand over the place, and I will be cured of the leprosy!’ Aren’t the Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed? So he turned and went away in a burning rage.

But his servants approached and spoke to him. They said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not do it? How much more when he says to you, ‘Wash and be clean’?”

So he went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. Then his flesh was restored like the flesh of a small child, and he was clean. Then he and his whole escort went back to the man of God. He stood in front of Elisha and said, “To be sure, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel...”

Na'aman is a powerful man; he is a powerful commander in a powerful army. But of course, there are some things that human power cannot always stop. Disease is one of them. Na'aman has leprosy, and he is powerless to cure it. Whether his leprosy was a death sentence or an annoyance or anywhere in between, we cannot say. We can only say that Na'aman is powerless to stop it.

It is a good thing for Na'aman that during one of his conquests he brought home a gift for his wife. That gift is a girl from the neighboring nation of Israel. And it's a good thing for Naaman that this Israelite girl who serves his wife has immense courage. The girl is brave enough to say: I know a man in my country who can take Naaman's disease away. She says this even though speaking up could have cost her life.

It is because this brave girl speaks up and recommends the prophet of Israel that Naaman goes to his king and asks for permission to go to Israel. It's because of her that we have the rest of this story. It is the story of Naaman, where we learn that in order to find the power of God, in order to find his blessing and his grace, we need to stop looking at things on the surface, and instead look deeper.

There is a sad irony in the king of Israel's panic when he reads the letter from Na'aman's king. The letter reads, **"I am sending my officer Na'aman to you so that you can cure him of his leprosy."** The king of Israel is supposed to be the spiritual leader of Israel, a shepherd-king who leads his people in the Lord. But when he reads the phrase, **"you can cure him,"** he panics. He panics because he does not believe what the servant-girl does: Elisha the prophet can help, because the Lord's strength is behind him. When he sees **"you can cure him,"** he thinks only of his own human power, which is of course powerless to stop leprosy.

All human power is powerless here. Na'aman can't stop it. The king of Israel knows he can't stop it, and thinks he may have to fight war because he can't! But Elisha knows what the servant-girl does: where human power is powerless, the Lord's power prevails. And to find that power, we need to look deeper, beneath the surface of things.

Elisha the prophet summons Na'aman, and Elisha gives him some very simple instructions. Too simple, from one point of view: **"Go and wash seven times in the Jordan. Then your flesh will be restored and you will be clean."** And Na'aman instantly blows his stack at that suggestion. How could washing in a dirty river like the Jordan make his skin clean? You're more likely to catch an additional skin disease in the Jordan than to cure one! And why did he have to travel all the way to Israel to wash in a river, anyway? Naaman exclaims: **"Aren't the Abana and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"** Naaman has a point, from a certain perspective. The rivers he refers to are swift, clean, mountain streams right in his backyard. The whole idea of traveling all this way and then washing in a grody river like the Jordan looks ridiculous to Naaman. But Na'aman is about to learn: God's power to cure lies beneath the surface of things that don't look like much at all.

Before you understand that, you can only think the way Na'aman thinks at first: If something amazing is going to happen – if a man is going to be cured of a terminal disease – shouldn't it require something that looks more impressive than washing in a dirty river? Naaman sure thinks so: **"Look, I said to myself, 'He will certainly come and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God and wave his hand over the**

place, and I will be cured of the leprosy!” Naaman is expecting some sort of show to take his leprosy away. A little hocus-pocus-alla-kazaam. When he doesn't get his show, he's disappointed.

Naaman is so upset by this lack of fireworks, this simple plan of washing in the yucky Jordan River that he's ready, after traveling five hundred miles, to just turn back around and go home! **So he turned and went away in a bitter rage.**

Naaman is looking at things on the surface, and he's missing what's deeper. This plan is not going to work because the waters of the Jordan are so special. It's not going to work because Elisha did or didn't perform a show. This plan is going to work because the promise of God is behind it.

It's a good thing for Na'man that he has servants who are brave enough to speak up – first to his wife and now to him. His servants calm him down and make him think twice. **“My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not do it? How much more when he tells you, ‘Wash and be clean!’** Their “we-came-all-this-way-might-as-well-give-it-a-shot logic hits home. Na'aman dips himself in the mucky waters of the Jordan and comes out with his leprous skin cleansed, clear like the skin of a child.

By God's grace, Na'aman stops thinking about the way the Jordan look. After he is cleansed, he finally looks deeper than its appearance. Beneath the ugly waters of the Jordan Naaman sees a promise from the God of Israel: “wash and be cleansed.” In faith, he now looks deeper – to the promise behind the water. Now he even returns to Elisah and confesses the Lord God of Israel as the one true God.

We live in a world obsessed with appearances. Watch TV for a few hours and count how many ugly actors and actresses you see. Unless the story specifically calls for an unattractive person, there won't be many. Take a walk through the clothing stores at Potomac Mills, and check out the pictures hanging on the walls. Every face is beautiful and clear, unless it's the “before picture” in a set of “before-and-after” pictures. Even politicians benefit from looking good. Few want to hear about your policies unless you're tall and handsome or trim and pretty. Every president in my lifetime has been at least 6'2”, most with a handsome face and a nice smile.

It is a shallow world, mostly concerned with the way things look on the outside. When things look ugly or even just unimpressive, most people just want to turn away like Na'aman, ready to turn away from the ugly Jordan River. We may not turn in a rage as he did, but we turn with a shrug and yawn. What the Lord once told his prophet Samuel is true: **“People look at the outward appearance...”**

What Naaman learned, and what we need to learn, is to look deeper and find the promises and blessings of God that lie beneath the surface. As the Lord also said to Samuel: **“People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”** When Naaman looked with faith, when he looked deeper than the appearance of the Jordan, that is when he found the promise and the blessing of God, the cure for his leprosy.

God has also given us faith to look deeper than outward appearances, too look at the heart of things as he does. He gave us that faith the day he washed us in the waters of baptism. He forgave our sins and

gave us faith that looks deeper – and sees the promises and blessings of God that lie beneath the surface of things.

Baptism itself is one example of God's power behind what looks very ordinary. It is only water. But like the water of the Jordan that cleaned Na'aman of his leprosy, the water of baptism has God's promise and power behind it, to clean us of our sins. The same is true of our Savior's Supper, where two of the most common and unimpressive physical elements in the world deliver our Savior's own body and blood to us, to forgive us and strengthen our faith.

The most striking example of this is the cross of our Savior Jesus. Our Christian faith is centered on that very ugly sight of his suffering and death. It is the sight of a man, battered and bruised, hanging on a cross, an instrument of torture. It looks ugly. It looks repulsive. But God tells us to look deeper – to look to the promise and blessings of God in that ugly cross, that through Jesus' suffering and death our sins are forgiven and eternal life is ours. God's gift of faith looks deeper, and sees God's eternal promise behind Jesus' cross.

There are many other times in the life of a Christian when, in faith, we need to look deeper. One is in our prayer lives. I don't know about you, but so often when I pray, I expect to see beautiful results – the exact results that I have in mind. And when those beautiful results don't come, I start to view prayer as something of a wild goose chase. And it shows in how little time I spend in prayer. When it comes to prayer, we need to look deeper. Our confidence that God answers prayer should not rest on what we see – the results that come. Our confidence should rest in what lies behind our prayers. Behind the prayer of a Christian is the word of God, a promise that he does hear us and he does answer us, even if the results we see are not what we had in mind. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that your prayers' effectiveness depends on the results you see. Look deeper, and see the promise and blessing of God behind your prayers: he answers your prayers every time, according to his will, giving you exactly what is best for you.

When it comes to hearing and learning God's word, we also need to look deeper. The Bible doesn't look like much, just a book like any other book. And since the surface doesn't look too spectacular, Christians often take the attitude that they'll only study it and learn it if they have to, or when the topic fits their personal interests. Or, when the time comes to hear and learn God's word, Christians spend more time worrying about other things on the surface, issues that don't really matter in the end. Is the man preaching charming? Is he telling cute stories?

A friend of mine who is a pastor told me a lady in his congregation stopped attending worship. When he finally got to speak to her about it, she admitted she had switched churches because she didn't like his voice. She said it didn't match his body so she couldn't concentrate when he spoke. This is an extreme example, but an example of what is often true: when the Word of God is presented, people are paying more attention to frivolous matters on the surface than they are to the Word itself, and even conditioning whether or not they'll listen on those surface matters.

When it comes to hearing and learning God's word, we need to look much deeper than the speaker, or the building, or the vestments or the flowers or whatever else. We need to stop thinking about how the Bible itself looks on the surface: just another book. For the power, promises, and blessings of God are

down in that word itself, in its message. It is down in that word itself, in the message, where we find all the blessings of God, including forgiveness and eternal life.

Look deeper, too, when troubles come into your life. At the death of a loved one, for example, we may only look at things on the surface. And when we do, we see only years of loneliness ahead of us. We see only the loss of a friend. With God's blessing of faith, look deeper and see the promise and blessing of God behind that death. God promises that through faith in Jesus the person you have lost is now eternally blessed in heaven. And God promises to be with you and bless you, even as you miss that person. Look deeper, and see the blessing of his Son's empty tomb, and hear his promise: "He who believes in me never dies."

Finally, we need to look deeper when we look at each other. On the surface, your fellow Christian may sometimes be annoying. He may say inappropriate things at the wrong times and get on your nerves. She may be insensitive or uncaring. And that might make you think of that person as someone you don't want to be around, someone for you to hold a grudge against. But look deeper, and see the love of God behind that person. Jesus died for their thoughtless words and careless actions just as surely as he died for yours. He has forgiven them as surely as he forgives you. Look deeper, to the promises and blessings God has given that person in Christ, and you will no longer see them as quite so silly or annoying, but as your blood-bought brother or sister.

Like Na'aman, look deeper. With eyes of faith, see the promises and blessings of God beneath the surface, starting and ending with the promise of eternal life behind Jesus' cross. Amen.