

Sixth Sunday in Epiphany
February 16, 2003
2 Kings 5:1-14

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The LORD Isn't Limited by "That's Unlikely"

1. An unlikely recipient of his grace
2. An unlikely witness to his power
3. An unlikely means for his healing

NIV 2 Kings 5:1 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. 2 Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4 Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. 5 "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. 6 The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." 7 As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" 8 When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." 11 But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. 13 Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" 14 So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A recent magazine article attempted to explain why U.S. intelligence assets weren't able to warn our country about the September 11 attacks. It turns out that there were a lot of factors that contributed to the intelligence failure, or "defeat," as they prefer to say. There weren't enough spies. There weren't enough people who spoke the language of the terrorists. And there was too much intelligence for so few people to process. But beneath it all was an old problem known as "mirror imaging." When intelligence analysts mirror image, they project their own values and behaviors onto the people they are analyzing. Mirror imaging with Islamic terrorists means that because an American thinks it unlikely that anyone would be so barbaric as to use passenger planes to incinerate tall buildings and kill innocent people that he fails to consider that an Islamic terrorist might do exactly that. Mirror imaging may have happened in December of 1941, too. Though we had all kinds of information that the Japanese were up to something, our intelligence people didn't think it made any sense for the Japanese to attack the home base of the U.S. Pacific fleet. Because they thought it unlikely, they didn't look for it to happen and thus the surprise.

Mirror imaging doesn't just happen in the intelligence community. We tend to expect that God will operate the same way we would. Anything else, we assume, would be unlikely. As we read our Old Testament lesson for today, though, we find God doing one unlikely thing after another. And it reminds us that **the LORD isn't limited by "that's unlikely."** Here in the story of the healing of Naaman we learn about 1] an unlikely recipient of the LORD's grace, 2] an unlikely witness to the LORD's power, and 3] an unlikely means for the LORD's healing.

1. An unlikely recipient of his grace

This Naaman has an impressive resume. It says, "*Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier...*" The fellow was the top general in the Syrian army and a war hero, probably for his efforts in battle against the Assyrians. He was brave and influential, but his string of accolades ends "he had leprosy."

The text notes in the NIV always point out that what's called leprosy here may not be the same as what we call leprosy today. But it's clear that whatever skin disease Naaman had went beyond being embarrassing. It was probably something that could disfigure and ultimately isolate Naaman and end his career as general, if not kill him. That we're not talking about a little rash here is clear from the king's ransom type of reward that Naaman was prepared to offer to the person who could heal him.

As you might guess from his position, Naaman was also a proud man. When he found out that there was someone in Israel who could cure his leprosy, how did

he go to Israel? As a humble supplicant seeking a cure? No! He went with chariots and horses and servants. And he became angry when the prophet Elisha directed him to bathe in the Jordan River in order to be cleansed of his leprosy.

What makes Naaman a most unlikely candidate for God's grace, though, is that his country was frequently at odds with the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In the very next chapter of 2 Kings we read that Israel was at war with Aram (Syria). This man was an oppressor of God's people. Yet here it is: Naaman goes to Elisha for a cure and, ultimately, goes back to Syria sporting skin as smooth as that of a child. As Jesus would point out more than 800 years later, there were many lepers in Israel during Elisha's time. But it was Naaman who by God's grace was led to seek out Elisha for a cure. It was Naaman who by God's grace didn't stalk away in anger when Elisha didn't proceed as Naaman expected. And best of all, by God's grace, it was Naaman who became a believer in the true God. He will confess later, "**Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.**" Clearly, what we might think unlikely is no obstacle to God.

But we have to be a bit careful when we talk about *unlikely* recipients of God's grace. We're all *unlikely* recipients of God's grace. That's what grace is: It's God's love for those who are the unlikely objects of his favor. Remember what St. Paul said? "**By the grace of God I am what I am.**" (1 Cor. 15:10) That a violent persecutor of Christians should become an apostle of Jesus Christ seems highly unlikely. But that's what happened, by grace. God has a track record of this sort of thing. Think of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. She'd been through five marriages and was now living in sin with a sixth man. Yet Jesus reached out to her with his grace and brought her into his family of believers. And our stories are not really any different. We're sinners, too, doomed to hell as we draw our first breath. But Jesus suffered our verdict of damnation and replaced it with immortality as he rose from the grave. He graciously washed us clean in baptism and made us his own. Unlikely though it may be, we are recipients of his grace.

To hear about Naaman is to be reminded not to write anyone off as out of reach of God's grace. There's no such thing as being too rich or too poor to be a recipient of God's grace. It's clear that nationality and race don't matter to God, so they shouldn't matter to us in sharing God's grace. Even a history of despising God's grace doesn't mean that a person has to continue that way. The story of Naaman says to us: Don't limit God's grace to the "likely recipients." Since we're all "unlikely," all we can do is share the good news about Jesus and leave the results to God.

2. An unlikely witness to his power

Speaking of sharing the gospel brings us to a second "that's unlikely" here in 2 Kings 5. Naaman knew about the LORD's power to heal him of his leprosy because the LORD led a slave girl to bear witness to her faith in the LORD's

power. We don't know much about this little girl. We know that she was part Naaman's household staff due to war. She had been scooped up in one of the border raids that took place frequently on the Israelite/Syria border and then pressed into service to Naaman's wife. Besides being deprived of her freedom, she must have been afraid and lonely there in Syria, away from her family and her homeland.

If I had been that little servant girl, I don't know that I would have harbored kind feelings toward Naaman. I might even have smirked inwardly at the news that this arrogant pagan who was holding me captive had contracted leprosy. But the servant girl didn't do that. She went to her mistress and said, "*If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria (the capital of the Northern Kingdom)! He could cure him of his leprosy.*" The LORD used this little girl, as unlikely as it seemed, to bear witness to Naaman about the power and mercy of the true God.

Keep this little girl in mind the next time you're tempted to avoid a witnessing opportunity by asking, "Who am I?" We do that sometimes, don't we? Who am I? I don't talk very well. Who am I? I don't know my Bible well enough to witness. Who am I? They won't listen to me. Testifying to the riches of God's grace and his will to save all people through faith in Jesus his Son is tremendously important work. Men like Moses and the prophet Jeremiah saw it as such a great responsibility that they tried to beg off by offering excuses. But the LORD didn't let them. He called them to do his work and then he gave them the power to do what he called them to do. And if we're feeling humble about our qualifications for the task, that's a good thing. The worst thing would be for us to try to function as Christ's witnesses without a sense that we need his power working through us, as if we could do this on our own. Humility before the task of witnessing for Christ is a good thing, as long as we don't let it cause us to fall silent. But the Bible says that God routinely puts the treasure of the gospel message in jars of fragile clay to make it clear that "this surpassing power" is from God and not from us. What we need is not confidence in our own abilities, but confidence in the power of the gospel, that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation" and that "faith comes from hearing the message." So maybe God's choice of that little slave girl wasn't so unlikely. She had what she needed most for the task: confidence in God's power at work through Elisha.

3. An unlikely means for his healing

Now we come to the third and final "that's unlikely" in this section. Naaman, the unlikely recipient of God's grace, has come to the home of the prophet Elisha on the basis of the testimony of that unlikely little witness and Naaman does some mirror imaging of his own. He envisions how the prophet will deal with him: that Elisha will introduce himself, examine the leprosy, and then call on the name of the LORD and wave his hand over the spot and cure him.

What happened was quite different. Naaman's chariots rolled up to Elisha's door but Elisha didn't even go out to see Naaman. He didn't examine the leprosy or

do any hand waving. He just sent word via a messenger that Naaman was to bathe seven times in the Jordan River and he would be cleansed. This is where the whole mission almost ended in failure. Naaman was enraged that Elisha proceeded in such an unlikely manner. No interview. No examination. Just a highly unlikely prescription: Bathe in the Jordan seven times—the muddy Jordan! Naaman was so angry he was ready to go home. If it hadn't been for his servants, he might have. *"My father,"* his servants said, *"if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be clean!'"* Naaman heeded their urging and, as unlikely as it seems, when he emerged from the Jordan, his leprosy was gone.

It's still true today that the LORD's prescriptions sound unlikely. To people who are suffering from the dread and damning disease of the soul called sin, God says we are to look to his Son Jesus and live. And Jesus is hanging there from a cross, dying in what appears to be the helpless, shameful fashion of a common criminal. The death of God's Son Jesus is the cure for what's sick with my soul? Though it sounds unlikely, it's true. And the prescription to look to him in faith is one that works. Or we bring a child into this world. God says that child inherited the sin of its parents and he prescribes a bath: baptism. The water isn't special. It's just plain water. But because the water is joined to God's Word and promise, baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is powerful and effective to cleanse from sin and to save those who trust the Savior who works through baptism. And here we are today, weary from our sins, from the constant struggle of trying to live as children of light with our sinful natures and this sinful world as our constant opposition. The good we've left undone and the wrongs we've committed weigh on our souls. So Jesus says—what?—"Take and eat." "Take and drink." "This is my body given for you." "This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." The body and blood of Jesus Christ are in and with this little wafer of bread and this half-swallow of wine? I know it seems unlikely, but yes, they are. Here is a heavenly meal through which God gives us forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. Unlikely, yes, but "that's unlikely" never has limited the LORD.

In the intelligence community these days they're busy trying to think like the enemy does. They're desperate that mirror imaging does not leave our country open to another attack. But a bigger issue for us Christians is to know how God thinks. We've gotten some insight into that today. Because all of us are unlikely recipients of his grace, there are no unlikely recipients of his grace. If God can use a slave girl to bear witness to his power and mercy, he can use you. And as we witness we'll want to be clear about this: God's healing power is the message of the blood that flowed from the sacred veins of Jesus and paid for the sins of the whole world. That same message is the power at work in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Call it unlikely, but that's never limited the LORD. Amen.