

## RIVER OF HEALING

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 22, 2017  
Based on II Kings 5:1-14, Isaiah 1:16-17, Matt. 3:4-6,13-17, John 5:2-9***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “River of Life—opening our lives to the healing streams of God’s grace.” Last week we saw how a river in the Bible is a prominent symbol of life—how God can bring new life out of dry and dead places. This morning we will look at another way in which the image of the river appears prominently in the Bible—as a symbol of healing. There are multiple Biblical stories in which a river or a pool is a place of healing. The idea that God brings healing is highly relevant, as it speaks to us on multiple levels. We may need healing in our bodies. We may need healing in our hearts and minds. We may need healing in relationships. Our whole society, certainly, is in need of healing, as evidenced in the extraordinary events of this past week. Can God bring healing? This will be our focus today. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

It’s a big deal when the big guy rides into town. The king enters a city in a grand procession. Roman emperors would ride into Rome after a triumphant campaign in a glorious and spectacular parade. And in our own country, every time we have an inauguration there is a big spectacle in our capital, as the leader of the most powerful nation in the world rides into town. In our Old Testament story this morning, there was likewise a big guy riding into town. Naaman—commander in chief of the army of Syria {Aram}, honored in his home country, feared by his opponents, and at the pinnacle of the most powerful army in the region at the time—came riding into the city of Samaria. He was, as the Bible put it, a “great man, highly regarded, and a mighty warrior.” [*Naaman was a great man, highly regarded, a mighty warrior II Kings 5:1*] He came, however, not in conquest, but because he had a serious problem. Naaman was afflicted with leprosy, a disease for which there was no treatment and no cure. But an Israelite girl, who had been taken captive by the Syrians on one of their raids and now served as a maid to Naaman's wife, suggested that there was a prophet in Israel who could bring healing.

Thus Naaman journeyed to Israel; and he came with an impressive entrance. He was a big shot, and he made an appropriate appearance. We are told in our passage that Naaman proceeded to load up a pile of money with which he expected to purchase a cure—the rich know how to throw their money around to try get what they want. He heaped up ten talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold, and ten festal garments—the equivalent value today would be in the many millions of dollars. And we must not imagine that Naaman would have just trotted off with all this loot in a wagon behind him. A potentate of his stature would have had an entire retinue, a caravan with him, both for protection and also to afford him the kind of glorious accompaniment on his journey and the luxurious travel gear that befitted a man in his position. The Bible refers at one point to “his whole company” that was traveling with him.

Naaman thus makes a grand entrance into the city of Samaria, and he heads straight for the king’s palace, where the king of Israel is totally intimidated when Naaman

announces that he has come for a cure for his leprosy. The king exclaims, “Am I God, that this man asks for a cure for his leprosy?” [II Kings 5:7] But then he is persuaded that Naaman should go see the prophet of God, Elisha. So Naaman is directed to the town of Dothan, where Elisha lives.

Off goes Naaman’s procession to make another grand entrance into the town of Dothan. [*Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. II Kings 2:9*] Naaman surely expects that he will be greeted by crowds of astonished and impressed villagers, and of course that he will be received in a most dignified fashion by the prophet himself. But when he arrives at his destination, the prophet is nowhere to be seen. There’s no mention of any crowds either—it is a puny town. Instead, out trundles the servant of Elisha, who announces to Naaman, “The prophet says, “Go wash in the Jordan.” [*Elisha sent a servant to him saying, “Go wash in the Jordan . . .” II Kings 1:10*]

It’s sort of like saying, “Go soak yourself.” And to get a full sense of this, you’ve got to have an accurate picture of the Jordan. When we hear about the Jordan River in the Bible, we note that it plays a significant role, and so we tend to imagine that this was an impressive river. But in fact the Jordan is a modest stream. It is only 150 miles long, and is somewhat comparable to the Cuyahoga. The Cuyahoga is shorter, but gets more rain in its watershed. Like the Cuyahoga, the Jordan is a rushing though relatively small river in its upper part, and is slow, muddy, and meandering in its lower part, which is where Naaman was. Nowhere is it particularly grand.

Naaman was incensed. Here he was—the great Naaman—and the prophet did not even bother to see him but told him to go wade in the mucky water of the Jordan. Naaman was about to storm off in a huff, but his servants prevailed upon him that maybe he should do what the prophet said. So Naaman went down into the waters of the Jordan.

As he stood there, his feet in the mud, or stubbing up against rocks and sticks, and the brown water swirling slowly around him, he suddenly was not so grand anymore. There is a parallel today in what happens when people go into the hospital. You can have all the wealth and power in the world—a fancy car, beautiful clothes, a grand house—but when you go into the hospital, they take it all away and give you a skimpy cotton gown, a simple bed, and a small room. Illness is a humbling experience. We realize our need for God.

Standing in the Jordan, Naaman plunged himself into the water. The prophet had told him to “go wash in the Jordan”—but it was not an outward washing that he was after; it was a spiritual cleansing. There in the river, Naaman finally put off his pride, and he opened himself to God. As he plunged into the river—seven times in succession—he began to feel the cleansing and the renewal of God’s grace. It was a kind of baptism, indeed a foretaste of many baptisms to come.

When Naaman emerged from the water, he was healed—on multiple levels. He was healed of his leprosy, and he was healed of his pride. As the story of Naaman proceeds beyond what we heard in the Scripture reading, Naaman appears as a different sort of person from the pompous big shot who had first entered the land of Israel. He becomes

grateful, humble, generous, and pious. The story concludes with him asking the prophet for blessing and promising to continue to worship the God of Israel in his homeland.

The story as a whole is thus a powerful picture of how God works for healing— healing of our bodies and healing of our spirits. The story is also the most prominent Old Testament account in which a river is a place of personal healing. But the image of water as a symbol of cleansing and spiritual renewal is also found in many other places in the Old Testament. In the temple, for example, there was a large basin or laver of water near the entrance where the priests were to wash their hands. This was not really about hygiene; it was first and foremost a sign of spiritual cleansing, and it is reflected in the basin of water that we use for baptism today. Later prophets also picked up on this theme of washing away all that is wrong in one's life; as Isaiah said, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before God's eyes." [Isaiah 1:16]

The Old Testament thus presents an overarching image of water as a symbol of healing—how God works to cleanse, restore, and renew; and that image is then carried forward into the New Testament most centrally in the act of baptism. John the Baptist, building on the early experience of Naaman, invited people in his day to come to the Jordan River. There they were plunged under the water—just like Naaman—and just as Naaman shed his pride and turned himself toward God, so as people entered the waters of the river, John the Baptist invited them to repent of their sin, to turn toward God, to experience God's cleansing and renewal, and to find new life in God's grace.

Then Jesus came to the river. John the Baptist knew that Jesus did not need to be baptized—as he said, "I am the one who should be baptized by you"—but Jesus insisted on being baptized as a model for us all. Baptism would thus be for Christians in every age a picture of how God's grace can work in us—washing us clean from all that would soil our spirits, healing the brokenness within us, refreshing our soul, and preparing us to live anew as God's people.

There is value in symbolism. As we have seen, both this Sunday and last, flowing water is a central Biblical symbol of the power of God to bring healing, restoration, and life. But of course the power finally is not in the symbol itself; the power is in what the symbol represents. This is quite evident in the final story that we heard from the Scriptures this morning—about a man at the pool of Bethesda, or Bethzatha as it is variously rendered—a story that encapsulates how God heals.

We are told that every day many ill and lame people would gather around this particular pool because it was believed that they could find healing there. Verse four of our passage comments about this; this verse is recognized by Biblical scholars to be a later commentary—it is not in the earliest versions that we have of the gospel, but it was added by a scribe later, in order to explain for the reader the particular legend of this pool. Periodically, the water in the pool would be "troubled"—like the jets being turned on in a hot tub—there would be a churning and a bubbling in the pool. No one knows why this happened. The speculation today is that the pool was connected somehow to a subterranean spring, which periodically sent a gush of water into the pool. The legend at the time was that an angel stirred up the water; and whenever this happened, the legend

was that whoever got into the pool first would be healed. It was sort of an ancient version of “the early bird gets the worm.” Of course, what would happen was that as soon as the water was stirred, dozens of people would plunge into the water at once, and in all the commotion it would be quite difficult to tell who was actually first and whether anyone was really healed. So the legend persisted.

The image of the “troubling of the waters” is an interesting picture; it can represent how God sometimes stirs things up in life, and how in the midst of that God can create new possibilities. But of course the new possibility in this case would come not from the water itself but from the arrival of Jesus.

There was a particular lame man by the pool who had no friends or family with him. He was sad case. When the water was stirred, he could not move himself quickly enough to get into the pool. So he lay there in misery, alone, feeling that help was always beyond reach.

But God was about to stir up the waters. Jesus arrived and approached the man. Jesus said to him, “Do you wish to be made well?” It is a pointed question for each of us. We need to want God to work for healing within us, which means we need to be ready to put aside old ways and old patterns of thinking. When Naaman was healed, it meant a radical change in his perspective and orientation in life. For this man by the pool to be healed would mean a major change in his life. This is fact is what “washing in the water” symbolizes—a washing away of the bad old stuff so that we can arise afresh in life. The man by the pool did want to be healed; but he felt constrained by what seemed to him to be insurmountable limits—he just could not get into that pool in time. But in fact he did not need any sort of magic water. What he needed was the touch of Christ. Jesus said, “Rise, take up your mat, and walk.” The man arose and walked.

The man by the pool and Naaman may seem at first glance to be quite different—one was poor and the other rich, one was weak and the other powerful, one was alone and the other surrounded by fawning admirers; but in the end they were each quite similar, because both were in need of healing, and both found healing in the waters of God’s grace. Their stories point to key elements in how God can be at work in us:

- (1) They show that God’s healing is without limits. There are difficult circumstances in life that seem well nigh beyond hope, and this was certainly the case in our Scriptures stories: leprosy was incurable, and the man by the pool was in an apparently impossible situation; but as Jesus would later say, “All things are possible with God.”
- (2) The stories also show that God’s healing is free. Naaman did not need all that money he had heaped up, and the man by the pool had nothing to offer in the first place. But the Lord bestows blessing as a free gift.
- (3) At the same time, the stories make plain that we need to be receptive to the gift. Naaman had to put off his pride and open his heart. The man by the pool was asked, “Do you wish to be made well.”
- (4) And this means that we are ready for a change in our hearts and our way of living. Naaman became a different person, as did the man by the pool.

(5) The implication of such change, finally, is that we go forth to make a positive change in the world around us. Naaman went forth with a new commitment of faith, and the man by the pool began to have an impact, as the story progresses, as an example of what Jesus can do. It is significant that when the prophet Isaiah talked about being washed clean in God's eyes "*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before God's eyes.*" [Isaiah 1:16], he went on to say, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." [Isaiah 1:17] In other words, if we are truly washed in the waters of God's healing grace, it does not stop with personal betterment; we will go forth in mission to reach out to others and create a better world around us.

Water is a poignant symbol of all this. Water is powerful, it flows free, it washes clean, it creates new things. Thus it is a picture of what the Lord can do in us, and in our world—as we open ourselves to the healing streams of God's grace.