

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 15, 2009
2 Kings 5:1-14

“Where is Your Jordan?”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Two of our lessons for this day deal with the disease of leprosy, or rather with two very different individuals with the disease. In ancient times, it was a dreaded disease. People who had leprosy were viewed with horror and dread. In most instances they lived as outcasts in the societies where they were shunned. But we can't be sure precisely which skin disorder is actually leprosy. The Bible dictionaries state that there were probably a variety of skin diseases which were placed together into the category of leprosy. Some were highly contagious and progressively debilitating. Others were simply the result of the very dry and dusty conditions of the Middle East. Probably something like a hand lotion could have helped considerably.

While our purpose today is not to have a detailed discussion of the disease of leprosy, the attitude of the two men cured of that disease can lead us to a discussion of the question which is the theme for our sermon today: “Where is your Jordan?” May the Spirit of our God bless the Word as we consider it.

I. Naaman

Our first individual to consider is Naaman. He was commander of the army of the king of Syria. Though a man of great renown, he was also a leper. All of his attempts to find a cure for this disease had proved fruitless. His wealth and prestige and powerful position had gained nothing. Then a servant girl from Israel suggests that he see the prophet in Samaria who would cure him. Naaman goes to the king of Syria who sends him to the king of Israel. And he travels with a large gift of riches (ten talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing) The king of Israel is distraught at first by the request that Naaman be cured of his leprosy. “Am I God to kill and to make alive?”, the king asks. He thinks of it as a pretext for war between the two countries and Joram the king is most assuredly not on good speaking terms with the prophet. But the prophet Elisha hears of the need and invites Naaman to come to his house. He gives Naaman instructions through a messenger—Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.”

For Naaman, it was an insult. He had travelled all those miles from Damascus to Samaria. Here he stood before the door of the house of the prophet Elisha. Not only had the prophet refused to come out to greet him but he had told him that all he needed to do was wash seven times in the Jordan river. Perhaps he wished to see a more spectacular show of power of the God of Israel. But there was only this request, go and wash. In his anger, Naaman said, “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?" And so Naaman turned away angry. But his servants had the right idea. They reminded him that if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't he have done it? So they encouraged him to do just as the prophet had suggested. And Naaman did just that. He dipped himself seven times into the Jordan and his flesh was restored, and "became clean like that of a young boy."

In the verses which follow the Old Testament lesson, Naaman confesses to the prophet, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel ..." This previously haughty and proud man humbly bows in worship to the Lord.

II. Where is Your Jordan?

Now this account of Naaman the Syrian most directly brings to mind the question of our theme that must be addressed by each one of us: "Where is your Jordan?" For Naaman's initial reaction is in reality a microcosm of the reaction of the world to the way in which God deals with his people. How often do people not go around looking for signs and miracles? They want the spectacular, the showy, the thunderous voice of the Lord upon the mountain. They do not want to be led to a little stream that at times of the year was little more than a brook, flowing through the desert from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. And the church and its people often are just as deluded as they look for success in patented programs, and slick campaigns, or big groups and numbers. But it is not in these places that the grace of God shows itself. We need to find the Jordan.

III. Jesus and the Leper

And here in sharp contrast to the initial reaction of Naaman we have the account of the Gospel lesson for this day and the leper who sought Jesus. This account is told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. To a certain extent each of the accounts contributes something to our understanding of this event. St. Mark usually has the most compact and pointed account. He simply states that a "man with leprosy came to [Jesus] and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'" Even in these simple words there is a lot to be said. It is remarkable that this leper got this close to Jesus in the first place. Lepers who were in the vicinity of other people were supposed to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" so that there would be no accidental contact with them. They were not supposed to come near anyone. So for this leper to have come to Jesus (in all likelihood through the crowd that was accompanying the Lord) was remarkable.

It is with a considerable amount of faith that the leper addresses Jesus. If you will, you can make me clean. He must have known and heard of the works of the Lord. Perhaps he had been following at a distance for some time and knew the miracles which Jesus was performing. Whatever the case. He has the faith that Jesus can heal him.

The response of Jesus is also remarkable. Again, the Gospel relates very concisely: "Filled

with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." Jesus here does the unthinkable. He reached out and touches a leper. There is no fear of the disease from Jesus. Why should there be for as the prophet Isaiah had said, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." And Jesus shows forth his glory as the man is healed. This former leper did not need to seek the waters of the Jordan, he only needed to seek the one who himself had stood in the waters of the Jordan and heard the voice of the Father, "You are my beloved Son?"

IV. Connecting Thoughts

And so if we ask the question again, "Where is your Jordan?" the answer is found in him who reached out to the leper and said, "Be clean." In him we can find the answer to the question of forgiveness and peace. In him we find true healing as the Scripture says: "By his wounds we are healed." In His compassion we find cleansing and forgiveness as again the Scripture reminds us: "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." In Him we are washed and renewed. "For as many of you as were baptized in Christ have put on Christ." We were buried with Him that we might also be raised with Him. Christ is the center, the source, the reason for our faith, our life, our hope.

Perhaps there are times when we are like Naaman, seeking a more powerful sign. We would like to see the work of God shown forth in a way closer to our conception of the glory of God than in such simple ways. Then we need to hear the word of the Lord. There are other times when in our weakness we can only pray, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Then the Lord himself reaches out to us and touches us with nail pierced hands to remind us of his everlasting love.

He comes to us in simple ways with simple things: water, word, bread, and wine. We need not travel to the Jordan river. He comes to us in his holy and precious Word.

When I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death, and hell's destruction
Land me safe on Canaan's
Song of praises, I will ever give to Thee.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.