

08.10.25 Worship Service

Morning Prayer – Pastor Lois Harder

I will include a prayer for our sister church, Evangelio del Luz in Dallas, TX. On Friday evening one of their young men, a leader in their worship music, was involved in a bad car accident and he died. Along with the stress and uncertainty that this congregation already deals with, this was an added and tragic blow. They covet our prayers in the days and weeks to come. There is a card in the south lobby for anyone who'd like to sign it. We'll send it off tomorrow.

Loving God, this life is filled with mountain-top experiences as well as the valleys of the shadow of death. This morning we bring to you the gamut of what's in our hearts and we offer it all to you so that you can rejoice with our rejoicing and comfort the depths of our grief.

We pray for Pastor Juan and the congregation Evangelio del Luz. We pray for your presence, your comfort, your mercy and your strength for these, your children, your faithful followers. We pray for your hand of wisdom and compassion on Pastor Juan as he ministers and also grieves. We pray for the family of the young man who died, that they would know your love. We pray for the whole congregation as they surround this family to support and uphold them through these days and weeks and for years to come.

We offer our prayers of thanksgiving for Lalo, Cindy's neighbor as well as for Ismael, the young man detained and then released in San Francisco. We celebrate with them that they've been reunited with their families and we pray for their continued safety. We pray, God, for the thousands of people that are still detained, many with no charges and no representation. We acknowledge that this is not what your justice looks like and we pray for your mercy.

We thank you, God, for the joys and the celebrations of this life – for the gift of birth, specifically, the birth of Dawson Gene to Jill and Braden and Mia. We pray your blessing on them as they learn to be a family of 4 and make space for this new little person and who he will become. We thank you also for the celebration of marriage commitments – we think especially of Delton and Janice this morning as they celebrate 40 years of marriage in the midst of Janice's ongoing health issues – we pray your blessing on them and their family.

God, we're grateful for your gift of this Earth, our home, your garden. We know that shalom includes ALL of creation and our relationship to it. Give us wisdom, courage and the will to prioritize care for your creation.

Bless us now as we continue to worship by offering you our gifts and tithes. Amen.

WDC Assembly

- They worked very hard to acknowledge and include the Spanish speakers among us. There was always translation, many of the worship songs and prayers were in both languages, most of the church planting energy and life is in Spanish-speaking groups.

- Delegate sessions... budget situation, Safe Church model presented at MC USA is the model the denomination committed to using, so that we all have the same model with the same expectations and guidance.
- Workshops... Why Biblical Interpretation Matters for Challenging Christian Nationalism

2025-08-10

Bumbling kings and the power of God – 2 Kings 5

Pastor Lois Harder

Psalm 30, paired by the Lectionary editors with this passage from 2 Kings is a psalm of unfettered and unconditional praise. It acknowledges God as our ultimate salvation, retrieving us from illness, pain, suffering and death, but also from our own hubris and sense of self-importance. It reminds us that only in God do we find our reasons for hope and our sense of security. God is the source of our courage and compassion, our identity and our strength. It's a good fit to be read with 2 Kings 5. I can imagine that the heroes and heroines of the story might have prayed Psalm 30 fervently.

This story from 2 Kings starts us off on a 4-Sunday series thinking about God's righteousness and justice – and what that might look like in our time and place. Ironically, on a personal note, what I didn't know when I chose this series and this particular story WEEKS ago is how well I would be able to relate to Naaman as I preached this sermon! No, I'm not an army commander and I haven't won any military victories lately – or ever. And I don't have leprosy, but as some of you know, I do have shingles! It's getting better but it gives me a certain sort of empathy for Naaman that I haven't had before. I was comforted to read, in one commentary that, "Being unclean is not necessarily related to sin... There is no indication that Naaman's leprosy is punishment for sin, even though (he) may have been guilty of war crimes..., including the abduction of the young girl (who became a servant to his) wife. So," it goes on, "Naaman's leprosy is an unexplained circumstance." I hope and trust that my condition is also an "unexplained circumstance" and not brought on by sin, but I'm open to the possibility!

Let's see whether we can unpack the characters in this story a little bit to help us discover what the significance of it might be for us.

Naaman. This guy was a big deal. The commander of the King of Aram's army. Not only that, but he was the commander under whose leadership the Arameans were victorious over the Israelite army. It doesn't say that, specifically, in the verses that Justine read, but it's helpful to know that the Israelites and the Arameans had a complicated relationship – sometimes they were allies, like in Genesis 24 and 25 when Isaac needed a wife and Abraham told his servant to go look among the Arameans – Abraham had lived in the land of Aram, so they were a known and trusted quantity and a better choice than the Caananites! So, Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean was chosen for Isaac. Note: this is the first reminder in the story that God is more INclusive than EXclusive. Rebekah was an "outsider" but clearly became a significant part of the Israelite story.

But the Israelites and the Arameans were more often adversaries than they were allies. What this particular text also doesn't tell us is that this battle referred to in verses 1 and 2 that made

Naaman such a “great” man and commander is likely the battle in which King Jehoram’s father, Ahab was killed. In *Elijah*’s time as a prophet, (remember, Elijah was Elisha’s predecessor) Yahweh had promised that Ahab’s line would be wiped out. Why? Because when Ahab was king, he was a “deal-maker” and he tried to make a deal with Naboth, to purchase Naboth’s ancestral land for his own pleasure. Naboth refused and Ahab “went home resentful and sullen... He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.” (I Kings 21:4) Queen Jezebel caught wind of her husband’s unsuccessful transaction and in a twisted, evil scheme arranged for Naboth’s murder so that Ahab could then take Naboth’s land and colonize it according to his original plan. This made Yahweh very angry, so the prophet Elijah was sent to Ahab to deliver the divine message that because he and Jezebel had behaved so badly – violently taking what was not theirs – they would both meet a terrible end. Ahab tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and “humbled himself” before God. So God said, “Ok – I won’t bring a disastrous end to Ahab, but I will bring disaster to his sons and on his house.” (I Kings 21:29)

Ahab’s son was Jehoram – Jehoram was the king of Israel when this battle in 2 Kings, chapter 5 was fought and lost to Naaman and the Arameans. Are you with me so far?

With that as a backdrop, we can begin to understand why the king of Israel (Jehoram) freaked out when he received this letter from the king of Aram asking *him* to cure Naaman of his disease. Jehoram knew the history and he knew what the prophet Elijah had said about his father’s descendants being wiped out. It’s a little easier to understand his response of tearing his clothes, proclaiming that this request was unfair and that it was a set-up by the Aramean king to make the prophecy come true. A little paranoid, perhaps, but maybe justifiable.

Here’s the thing. None of the men that we’ve met so far in the story – the king of Aram, his powerhouse military General, and the king of Israel – none of them realized that they were not the main actors in this story at all. They only had little cameo appearances in the story. But each of them was so full of their own hubris, their own pride and fear, their own perceived self-importance that they all missed the point altogether. Now come the stars, the unexpected, true heroes and heroines in the story.

First, the young, un-named Israelite girl who had been abducted in the battle, one of the spoils of war, taken from her home and her family and enslaved in the service of Naaman’s wife. She was vulnerable, no doubt traumatized, an enslaved foreigner in a foreign land. And yet, this young girl demonstrates the kind of righteous justice to which God’s people are called. In spite of her circumstances, she spoke to Naaman’s wife, offering her knowledge of Yahweh’s prophet – someone she knew full-well could heal Naaman’s illness, through the power of God. Imagine the courage it took for her speak. Imagine the compassion she embodied, to share her faith and confidence in God with the very people who had “shattered her dreams, severed her relationships, destroyed her family, taken away her possessions, her freedom and her cultural identity.” (Cesar Garcia in his sermon at the *Anabaptism at 500* celebration in Zurich, Switzerland, 29 May, 2025) This young, nameless Israelite girl had NO voice, she was NO ONE. There was no logical reason for her to have been brave or compassionate. But she was both.

The men were so fixated on their own power and their own security that they did not listen carefully to what the young girl had recommended. They jumped immediately into a

transactional deal, sending mountains of money and stuff to try to get what they wanted. The girl had said to talk to the prophet – she never mentioned the kings.

Then comes the prophet – Elisha. The man of God, who heard that the king of Israel was freaking out. He sent a message to him asking, “Why have you torn your clothes? Send this guy to me – “so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel”. Like the young girl, Elisha’s concern was that Yahweh God would be at the center of the conversation and the solution to the problem.

When Naaman got to Elisha’s house and was met by a messenger rather than the prophet himself, he responded a little bit like king Ahab in the earlier story. He was self-absorbed and pouty, offended that he didn’t get a red-carpet reception and a shock and awe performance of healing – befitting of such a great military commander. And furthermore he was insulted by the prophet’s instructions. Why should he get into the nasty Jordan River when the rivers in Damascus were so much better?

Now we meet the rest of the heroes – the un-named servants of Naaman. Again, people with no names, no voice, absolutely no authority and no legs to stand on if they irritated Naaman – he had the power to fire them (or worse).

They also show us how God’s righteous justice takes shape. They cautiously and courageously challenged Naaman to “just give it a try. What could it hurt?” So Naaman, to his credit, humbled himself and followed the prophets’ instructions. And his skin was restored. He was healed.

But it wasn’t only his skin that was healed. It was his attitude, his spirit, which, of course, was the prophet’s goal. Naaman returned to Elisha to proclaim his belief in Yahweh God. But he still didn’t quite get it. He was still in that transactional mode and rather than just receive the gift of healing from God, he wanted to give a gift back – as if he could repay Elisha or his God. Elisha would have none of it, proclaiming that God can never be repaid for his undeserved mercy and love. And if he, as God’s prophet, accepted these transactional gifts his work as a prophet would be destroyed.

And here, we see Naaman’s true change of heart. He understands Elisha’s message and moves from a transactional position to one of humble acceptance and repentance. He asks Elisha for dirt – Israelite soil. So that when he returns to Aramea, he can worship the God of Israel on Israelite soil. The ancients believed that their gods were specific to their ground, their soil. Also, he confessed that when he returned to the service of the Aramean king he would be expected to accompany the king in his idolatrous worship rituals and he asked for pre-emptive forgiveness. Elisha’s response was simple. “Go in peace.” In The Message, this verse says, “Everything will be all right. Go in peace.”

Hundreds of years later the prophet Jesus was right in line with the prophets Elijah and Elisha, teaching that God’s justice is not retributive or vengeful. God’s justice doesn’t give oppressors what they deserve, but what they need... truth, humility, the possibility of healing and forgiveness. Jesus didn’t deny or ignore the terrible violence, injustice and oppression of his day

but neither did he demand retribution or revenge. The way of God's righteous justice is through God's people embodying God's truth, courage, love and compassion. May we be those people.

Sources consulted:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3

Texts for Preaching; A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C

1&2 Kings Believers Church Bible Commentary by Lynn Jost

Benediction – from Clare of Assisi in 13th century Italy (VT #1062)

Live without fear:

your Creator has made you holy,

has always protected you,

and loves you as a mother (and a father).

Go in peace to follow the good road,

and may God's blessing

be with you always.