**“Washed”**

2 Kings 5: 1–19

February 19, 2017, David M. Griebner and Herman Dick, Riverside UMC

We are going to spend the next two weeks in the Old Testament in a passage from 2 Kings. We read this passage a couple weeks ago in our Thursday morning men’s Bible study and afterwards both Herman and I were struck by how rich this story was. So we decided to spend a couple weeks on it.

Let me begin by setting the stage a bit. It’s around 851 to 842 B.C. At this time the little nation of Israel is divided into a northern kingdom, called Israel, and a southern kingdom, called Judah. The events in 2 Kings 5 take place in the northern kingdom.

Today I want to focus on two people in the story, Naaman and Elisha. Naaman was a highly decorated commander of the army in Aram. Aram is another name for Syria. Unfortunately Naaman has leprosy. Leprosy was a general term given to a variety of skin diseases. This is not the devastating leprosy we think of, but maybe a persistent rash or skin condition that is uncomfortable but not life threatening. The other name you need to know is Elisha. Elisha was a prophet in Israel. He was the successor to the great prophet Elijah, his mentor.

Now with this little bit of background, I want to dig into this story from the perspective of Naaman. What is Naaman thinking and feeling? What’s going on inside him as this story unfolds? The reason I want to come at this text this way is because when everything else is said and done this is a conversion story. It’s about a heart that was changed, Naaman’s heart. And the best way to hear this kind of story is from the inside.

So you are Naaman. What’s your life like? Well for the most part you feel pretty good. By all accounts you are a successful man, what we might call a high achiever. You are, as I have already said, a highly decorated commander in the Syrian army. You have won impressive victories for your king. You are described as a “great man” who is “highly regarded.” However, there is also some evidence that because of all this you have a pretty high opinion of yourself. Let’s call it pride. This will show up as the story unfolds. But it will not be the last word.

There is however one thing. You have leprosy. It’s not life threatening, but it does make your life uncomfortable. And if there were some way to get rid of it, you would want to know. So you are delighted one day when your wife comes to you. She tells you that her servant girl, the one from Israel, says there is a prophet in that land who can heal your leprosy.

It’s time to cash in some chips with the king. You go to him, explain the situation and ask for his permission to go to Israel. Of course He doesn’t hesitate. Anything for his favorite commander. “Go” he says. He even writes a letter to the king of Israel for you.

Now you know how the world works. There is no free lunch. If you want this prophet to heal you it’s probably going to cost you something, maybe a lot of something. So you raise all the cash you can. Ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. Is it enough? You don’t know, but the gold itself is worth more than the annual income of 6000 ordinary workers. Whoever this prophet is, he will have to be impressed.

The journey isn’t long. You take your letter to the king of Israel, but things don’t start out so good. He doesn’t know what to do. In fact he’s afraid that he’s being set up, and this is just a reason to attack him. But then a word comes from someone called Elisha. He tells the king to send you to him. This must be the one the servant girl was talking about.

You go. You arrive in style. You show up at the prophet’s home with everything you’ve got, your gold, your silver, your chariots and all your servants. You expect the prophet to come out, survey the situation, eyeball all that gold and silver, and, like everyone else, give you what you want.

But that isn’t what happens. Elisha doesn’t show his face. Instead he sends a servant. A servant! And he doesn’t ask you to do something that feels anywhere close to how important you are. Go wash in the Jordan seven times. That’s it! Who does he think he is? Who does he think I am? I am not a man to be trifled with!

You storm away. You start to mutter to yourself. ‘For crying out loud, I won’t be treated like this. I’m an important man. I’ve brought a lot of money. I want this done, I want it done now, and I want it done my way! And what’s so special about the river Jordan? We have rivers back home that are far better than that muddy little thing! How dare he treat me this way!’

But in the midst of your tirade your trusted servants come to you. They ask you if you would have been happier if the prophet had told you to do something hard? Would you have been happier if he had looked at all the gold and silver you brought and told you it was not enough? And what do you have to lose by doing what he said? For some reason you listen. For some reason it makes sense. So you do it. You do what the prophet told you to do. You come up out of the water for the seventh time and run your hands over your skin. Where you expected to find the signs of your leprosy, instead your skin feels like it did when you were a boy.

But now you face another choice. You have what you came for. You could walk away. You could just go home – with all your money! But something won’t let you. Something more than your leprosy has been healed. You know you have to go back to the prophet. This time he comes out to meet you. You try to offer him the money you brought with you. But he won’t take it.

And then, finally, you see the truth. The prophet is right. It’s not about the money. It’s not about all your achievements – if they ever were yours. It’s about this God, the God of Israel. You weren’t healed because of your status. You weren’t healed because of your accomplishments. You weren’t healed because the water, or even the prophet. It was gift, a gift that came because, despite yourself, you went to the river. Despite yourself, you trusted.

You know you have to go back to Syria, but you don’t want to. You don’t want to go back to your gods, to the gods you now know are nothing. You want to worship this God, the God of Israel. But how? Dirt. That’s it. Take some of the land with you. Build an altar where you live. Then you can worship this God, the true God, the God of Israel where you are. You ask Elisha if you can have some dirt. He says, “Yes” and gives you his blessing.

Now that last bit may have been a little confusing. At this time there was a general belief that the power of a god was limited to the land where that god was worshipped. I know it doesn’t make sense to us but it did to him. So that explains the dirt.

*So where does this lead us? What does this story point to?* I can only tell you where it led me and where it pointed me. It led me to Jesus. It pointed to what God has done for us in Jesus and how we can embrace what He offers. In Jesus God offers to forgive us for all our sins. In Jesus God offers to heal, or repair, everything that has separated us from God and from our true selves. In Jesus God offers to put us on a path of hope and healing and forgiveness and reconciliation. And it’s not something we can buy. It’s not something we can deserve. It’s not something we can purchase. It’s a gift. A free gift. No strings attached.

You may note that there is no title for this message in the bulletin. For the longest time I couldn’t think of one. But the moment I wrote the words I just shared, I finally found it. It was staring me in the face. If I could go back and add a title it would be this: “Washed.” Naaman was told to go and wash in the water of the Jordan. He didn’t understand, and at first he didn’t want to do it, but he did it, and he was healed. It’s the same with Jesus. God says we can all be washed clean in the blood of Jesus. Maybe we don’t understand that. Maybe we think that’s an old picture from a world long gone. Maybe you know someone who doesn’t like being told that’s what needs to happen. Maybe you aren’t sure yourself. But the overwhelming evidence is that when we do accept it, even when we try to accept it, maybe even we decide we are open to the idea, we suddenly begin to see, like Naaman, that this is what our hearts have been seeking, yearning for all along. We need to be washed and we cannot wash ourselves. We need a Savior.

As Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30) *He is the only one in the whole world, in all history, who can say this and it is true, all true.*

Last Sunday evening for our New Member/Refresh class we watched the ALPHA video titled “Why did Jesus die?” The video includes several stories about people who have accepted this offer, the offer to be washed by Jesus. The story that made the biggest impact on me was a true story about Darrell Tunningly. Darrell was a petty criminal who was eventually caught and sentenced to 7 years in prison. When he was sentenced he said to himself, “Well, that’s it. If I going to be bad then I am going to be the worst kind of bad.” And so he was moved from prison to prison because of his behavior and eventually ended up in maximum security. One afternoon another inmate came by and asked him if he wanted to go on an ALPHA course. He didn’t know what the guy was talking about so he did what he always did, he threatened him and pushed him away. The next day the guy was back. Darrell saw him coming and he was just waiting for him to get close enough so he could hit him. But before that could happen the kid said, “You get Wednesdays off and free coffee and free biscuits!” That did it. Darrell was in. He was in for all the wrong reasons, but he was in. But something happened. It didn’t happen because of what they were saying; it happened because of how they were saying it. It was with such love. He says, the ALPHA team, which consisted of two retired nuns and a pastor, “came back at me with love and compassion, every single time.” He’d never, ever felt anything like it. So one night he sat on his bed and prayed the first real prayer he had ever said in his life. He didn’t even know if he was doing it right. He said to God, “I need you to take away the anger, the violence, the hate. I need you to take away the addictions, which I’ve tried to fight and I just lose every time. If you will do that for me, I will live the rest of my life for you.”

The next morning he rolled over to grab a smoke as he had always did. But he couldn’t touch it. He says, “Everything about it, the look, the thought, the smell, made me want to made me sick.” So he threw all his cigarettes out the window. He told himself to calm down, go get a wash, go get a shave. But when he looked at himself in the mirror he said, “I did not recognize my own reflection. I was smiling. Not just smiling, beaming.” It was as if everything had gone. The chaplain came by and he told him everything that had happened. The chaplain said, “The man that went to bed last night is not the same man that’s standing here this morning. You are a new creation.” When it came time for him to be released a pastor named Mark Finch picked him up. He said they just had a new church plant near Liverpool and they wanted someone who could reach the kids and the gangs. He’s now an evangelist in Great Britain and you can find his testimony online.

When the video was done I asked everyone to get in a small group of three or four. I asked them to simply reflect on what they were feeling and why. When it came my time to tell my group what I was feeling I was surprised when my voice cracked and I felt tears coming on. What was I feeling? I was overwhelmed that not just by the fact that God has loved us so beautifully in Jesus, but that He has given me, given us, this story to tell, this amazing, unparalleled, unbelievable story of His great love.

I hope you’ve heard it again today.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Thank you Jesus! Amen.