Sermon on 2 Kings 5:1-19

To jump right into our first reading: in v. 1 we read that Naaman, the commander of the armed forces of Aram is given victory by Yahweh; and we think, that must be a good thing!

The word translated here as victory in our English version is the Hebrew word Tashuah, which means salvation or deliverance.

As readers we’re further cheered for we know that all the great acts of Yahweh in the past on behalf of Israel (crossing the Red Sea, giving of the law, provision in the wilderness, conquering the promised land – all those things for which Israelites regularly gave thanks in their various feasts), all these things the Bible celebrates in terms of tashuah: salvation, deliverance, provision or healing or, as in this passage, victory.

When we, as did the Israelites, realize that this word is being used in connection with a foreign general we become uneasy. But when it becomes clear that Namann’s “victories,” Namaan’s “salvation” involves raids on Israel and the kidnapping and forced enslavement of Israel’s children unease turns to horror!

I mean, how do we feel about the Namaan’s of the world? How do we feel about people who use violence to further their gain; those people willing to displace others, to destroy families all for selfish reasons?

I certainly don’t feel comfortable attaching the world *salvation* to any of their names!

About the only relief the ancient Israelite or that you and I might feel at this point of the story is that Namaan has leprosy: “Yes! Get him God!” we might murmur, or, because we’re on the westcoast, Cascadia maybe we summon thoughts of Karma.

But our relief is short-lived. Now Namaan’s servant girl, one of those little ones ripped from the arms of her wailing mother, offers Naaman advice as to where he might get healed!

We want to jump into the page and clamp our hands over the girl’s mouth, “don’t say anything, you foolish little girl, let him get what’s coming to him, don’t you know you might even get to go home?”

But, we hope, perhaps Namaan won’t listen to her. Men never listen to women, especially little girls.

But he does! Even the King of Aram believes the little foreign slave girl! Is everybody nuts around here!? When will this topsy turvey tale right itself; when will justice triumph?

Then another thought, perhaps this is all part of God’s plan of justice? Perhaps God is using the young girl to lure Namaan to his just desserts?

I mean, that’s what Esther did to Hamaan, right?

The moment that Naaman sets foot on Israelite soil, he will surely be destroyed! What a God, what a sneaky plan!

But God doesn’t! And we are jolted anew. Indeed, the King of Israel, Jehosaphat is clueless. This too is deeply ironic: Namaan, the foreign general is seeking the help of Israel’s god; the little slave girl is playing the evangelist but the King, the one who is referred to as “the anointed one,”

The one after which the book we are reading is named, “the book of Kings,” he’s completely clueless, reduced to ruining a perfectly decent set of clothing in his delirium.

But on this roller coaster ride of a story, there is still hope, for it is not ultimately with Jehosaphat that Namaan will have to do but with Elisha, the same fierce and unpredictable Elisha that Elijah predicts will kill his share of the prophets of Baal

The same prophet who will, in the next chapter drive the King of Aram nuts because he’s able to hear all the words the king says in his bedchamber, hundreds of kilometers away. Yes, the chickens will come to roost with Elisha.

But then Elisha sends a message of aid! “Go wash seven times in the Jordan and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean!”

Now, even God’s fierce prophet is dispensing mercy and healing.

Cut! It was at this point of the story, with this flip flop of Elisha’s normal demeanor that I realized that my understanding of tashuah (salvation) was in need of some work!

Would I, will we, open up to a new level of understanding of God’s mercy? Will I seek to live more into God’s understanding of justice or from my own rather revengeful, narrow views?

Will we begin to change our way of looking at those whom we imagine having it coming to them?

I began to open to the insight that the story has been crafted to reveal and unpack our prejudices and biases; it has been crafted to probe our wounds of unrequited revenge, our sense of having been hard done by.

*Back to the story*: at the very last it appears that though all those who should by rights be Naaman’s enemies have only aided him, he himself, might undo the healing that surely must be his.

Namaan, it turns out, like us, is a bundle of contradictions
Violent warlord turned humble listener of a slave girl
willing to throw himself at his enemies feet

And yet now at the moment of truth, when all he has to do is obey Elisha’s command, pride kicks in!

He wants ceremony, he wants to be asked to do something grand and heroic; he wants to earn it, merit the healing in some way.

He’s willing to listen to his slave girl but not the instructions of the prophet! And so he turns to anger and has to be restrained by his servants, convinced by them to follow through.

Another interlude: I’ve come to be suspicious of most clichés but there is one that seems to be truer the longer I live: “He’s his worst enemy.”

Of all the bad things that happen to us in our lives, by others and by chance, it is we ourselves, our reactions, our attitudes and our lack of genuine self-love that hurts us the most.

For genuine self-regard treats our bodies, our minds and our hearts as the temple of the Holy, of the good and the true; it is the rare person who exhibits this kind of self-friendship.

But God is able, given the slightest opening, to break into even our self-hatred which masks as pride. Even our rage, our bitterness and our frustration that life has not unfolded as we thought it might (another one of those realities that every human being must reckon with) is not an ultimate obstacle to God’s mercy!

And we know this is true because Namaan accepts the mercy, seven times he dips in that muddly little stream that barely qualifies as a river, the Jordan.

But let’s be clear, he doesn’t become an Israelite; he continues to worship Rimmon; he’s still an enemy of Israel, this is not your typical, bad guy comes over to the good side story and it’s why it’s the ultimately destabilizing and confusing thing

The little slave girl doesn’t get to go home! Israel doesn’t become friends with the King of Aram!

Like the nine lepers who were Israelites but *don’t* come to Jesus, but the one foreigner does, this story shows us the profligate sense of God’s mercy.

But slowly it begins to dawn, if God’s mercy is towards Namaan, towards those who aren’t even thankful for the gifts they receive at God’s hands, then surely God’s mercy is towards me! Towards me in my self-righteous pride however that manifests itself, towards me as someone who still has so far to go in my own faith journey.

And from that basis perhaps we can begin to become more like the one who came back to give thanks in our gospel; perhaps we can begin to become become like the little Israelite slave girl who simply offered her insight into God towards one who needed it, regardless of what he had done to her and to others.

She, astoundingly exhibited thanks in her actions for what she *did* have: relationship with God, life, the opportunity to be of some good; not what she didn’t: her mother’s arms, her home and hearth. Rarely in the scriptures do we see such love for God, such love of neighbour and of self, such faith as we see in her!

At this table of Thanksgiving we recognize that we are all foreigners, all the surprising recipients of Tashuah: Salvation in all its wondrous bounty: physical, emotional, spiritual provision and mercy.

 It’s as we learn the self-regard, the self-care that comes when we receive mercy that we begin to open to a different way: instead of raging and fomenting when things don’t go our way or when people we dislike seem to be still blessed by God, we can begin to embrace the courage to humble ourselves and simply follow the Spirit’s instructions.

When we do, we will find that we experience a health that is both more surprising and more deeply beautiful than we had imagined possible. Amen.