

The battle belongs to the Lord
2 Kings 5:1-14

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Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Is there someone that you really don't like? Someone you **really** don't like? Someone that you don't like so much that you'd consider that person an enemy?

It's probably pretty rare here in Canada for people to say that I have enemies. But I know that at least some people here who at least once in their lives felt that they were in the midst of their enemies. They might even have called them evil, for their enemies were people with power who used it to hurt other people. Around the world, many people today still feel that they face their enemies, sometimes daily: people in the Darfur region of the Sudan, people in Iraq, or in Afghanistan, people in the land we call Israel.

How do we deal with enemies?

The usual answer is: we fight them. In some cases, that seems to be the very best thing to do.

But, this is after all God's world, and we believe that God is in control. We believe that this is a world that is under the control of God even though sin often obscures the plan of God from our vision.

And we believe from Scripture that from time to time, God pulls back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of what life is supposed to look like in God's world. It happens through prophets. They remind us that the battle belongs to the Lord.

They remind us that even some of the things that we call "evil" and some of the people that we call "enemies" are there for a purpose. Let's take a look behind the curtain...

Elishah was a prophet. He lived in a day when Israel was under constant threat from a huge Empire, called the Assyrian Empire. That Empire stretched at one point from India across the Middle East and down the Nile almost into Ethiopia.

In the day of Elishah, the Assyrian army was unstoppable. It advanced relentlessly because it was powerful. As it advanced, it made those it conquered into slaves, and raided neighbouring regions, making slaves of the women or worse.

And what did it do to the men they found. Because it was powerful, the Assyrian army could do whatever it wanted. It used any tactics that it wished to defeat anyone who would dare to stand up against them. To deter people from opposing them, Assyrian generals would hunt down the Empire's enemies and when it found them, would kill them, not quietly, not cleanly, not in secret, but by impaling them on spears, stripping the flesh from their bodies, and beheading them. These Generals, who were as important as the Emperor himself, were unstoppable. They had everything.

Or almost everything. After all, there is no one, in a world that belongs to God, who has everything. Only God has everything. And God gives it to whomever He will for God's purposes alone, purposes that are usually hidden to us. God even gives power to those we consider enemies, as our text tells us God had given it to Naaman.

Yes, this Naaman was one of these generals. He was as vicious and evil as any of the generals. He could kill any of his opponents without blinking. But the flesh was also falling off his body, even as he took it off the bodies of his enemies. He was a leper. He was dying from a disease that he could not fight and control.

Then one day, a little girl, captured in one of the Assyrian's regular raids against the people of Israel, a little girl who served as a servant girl in the General's house, told the General's wife about a man who could heal the General.

Now, it's unlikely that a powerful General would listen to a little slave girl, but he is in need. He has everything, except his health.

And so, he talks to his Emperor and asks him to write a letter to the king of Israel to heal him. In fact, so valuable is this General to the Assyrian Emperor, that the Emperor sends General Naaman to Israel with a note and almost half a ton of silver (10 talents), over a hundred pounds of gold (6000 shekels), and 10 of the finest garments (which probably would have been made of silk, and adorned with precious jewels). The Emperor is saying: Heal my general, and in order for you to do this, here is payment in advance, over two millions dollars.

But, the world belongs to God, not to any King or Emperor. Health is, in the end, God's to give.

But powerful people always think that to solve their problems only other powerful people can do it. But, even the King of Israel knows that he doesn't have the power of life and death and thinks that the Assyrian Emperor is setting him up to fail, so that he can then accuse the King of failing him and invade his land. The King is not just angry; he's scared, because he knows what the Assyrians have done elsewhere.

But, Elishah the prophet hears about the situation and asks the king to redirect Naaman to Elishah's little, insignificant house in the countryside of Israel.

Now you have to picture this: Riding up to Elishah's house comes one of the great generals of the greatest empire on earth. What do we expect? If you are an Assyrian, you expect the prophet to come out bowing, scraping the earth, before the General!

But, no, the prophet doesn't move. Elishah sends a messenger out to Naaman and tells him to go wash in the nearby Jordan River seven times to have his flesh restored.

"What?!", Naaman must have cried in fury. "No one will insult me that way!" So, in anger, he turns his horse away and starts to ride away, saying to himself:

"What an impudent wretch! He doesn't even acknowledge my power, or show me his! He just sits in his house and has a servant come out and tell me to go wash in the Jordan? The Jordan!! If it were just a question of washing in the river, he could have told me. After all, we have better rivers in Syria! What a waste of time!"

But, his own servants run after him and tell him at the very least to try. The least that could happen is that Naaman will be embarrassed by washing and not being cleansed. True, he would then become a laughing-stock in all Israel – the great general who thought an Israelite would help him become clean!! And all the Israelites on the hills above the Jordan laughing at him: Hah!! Hah!! But, if that happened, he could then return to Elishah's house and have him killed the way other enemies of Assyria were killed. But, if he is healed... Elishah must surely have known all this, but Elishah also knew that the battle really is the Lord's.

And so Naaman does get off his horse; he does take off his helmet, his breastplate, his armor, and his sword; and he does go into the Jordan, not once, not twice, but seven times. And lo and behold, on the seventh time that he dips himself into the Jordan – a filthy river, full of mud and everything else – Naaman's flesh is restored to the beauty of a little boy's flesh. It's a miracle! Everyone is shouting: "Hurray! Hurray! General Naaman's healed! He's fully restored!"

Hmm. Wait a minute: now that Naaman has been restored, what will he do? He's a General, in the most powerful army on earth. Has Elishah now been God's agent to provide for Naaman's healing, only to send him back to continue the job he was doing? In fact, there were probably a number of Israelites who saw what happened, or who back in Assyria had heard the little slave girl tell Naaman to go to Israel for healing, who said to themselves: "Oh great! Now General Naaman's fully restored and ready for action again!"

We don't know what happened to Naaman after he returned. What we do know is this: as vs. 15 indicates Naaman came out of the Jordan aware that the whole earth belongs to God, the God of Israel, the God of Elishah – and, yes, this probably means that even the Assyrian Empire belongs to this God! And because of that, I think that we can be pretty sure that Naaman was now going to return to Syria to begin to learn what this means.

But we also know that there were difficult years ahead for Israel. The Assyrian Empire would eventually defeat Israel in war and take more Israelites into captivity. There, in the present land of Syria and Iraq, a strange land, Israel would have to learn to serve God until in God's time and God's plan, Israel would again return home, to its own land.

My friends, there are two ways to fight our enemies.

One is to try to destroy them, either by attacking them head on or by undermining them and waiting for them to collapse under their own weight. We have seen both used today in Iraq by those who feel that they are fighting an Empire.

But, there is another way to fight enemies. It is the way given to Christians. It is to rely on the power of God made known to us throughout Scripture, a power that is, believe it or not, greater than even the most powerful enemy in the world. If we truly believe that this world is God's – and that is a big "if" – If we truly believe that the world is God's, then we need to remind ourselves that the battle for this world is also God's. And that God will win. He has given to us the seal of guarantee that He will win in His son's own death for this world, sinners and righteous alike.

How will God do it in the end? By defeating evil? Well, yes, but not in the way we expect it. Almost 1000 years after Naaman's baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus reminded the people of Israel of this story. He told them that God is as concerned about the enemies of Israel as He is about Israel. Why? Because they are as much part of God's world as Israel. The difference is: they don't know God, as Israel does. Israel's responsibility was not to eliminate their enemies through violence and death but by making God known to them and by thus making them children of God, just like Israel.

Do you remember the reaction of the Israelites who heard Jesus say this? They tried to kill Jesus who was telling them about God! Why? Because he was speaking favourably about people that had seriously hurt Israel, about Israel's enemies. Israel wanted vengeance on them, not forgiveness and mercy. In doing so Israel became God's enemy, taking God's own son to the cross. But even there, in Christ, God forgave His enemies.

Though Jesus, through Elishah, we learn not only that the world belongs to God, but that the battle for the world belongs to God, and that it will be a battle not of destruction and ruin, but of grace and mercy and forgiveness offered even to enemies. Faced with our enemies, God offers to heal them and us! God offers to start teaching them and us a better way. That's the battle, and thanks be to God, that's God's way of winning the battle.