

The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
2 Kings 5:1-15; St. Matthew 8:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

You have today the story of two different men. They're both Gentiles. They're both military commanders. They both have a grave concern that they want God to fix. And that's where their stories diverge.

On the one hand, you have the commander of the armies of Syria. He's a man of honor, nobility, and valor. To this man, Naaman, was given victory over Syria's enemies, including Israel. As it happened, on a particular raid, they had brought back a girl captive from the land of Israel. This girl waited on Naaman's wife.

On the other hand, you have the commander of a garrison of Roman soldiers—a centurion. He, too, was an honorable man. He knew his place in the armies of Rome—knew the authority he had been granted, and the responsibility that accompanied that authority. For, "I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." In other words, the centurion knew the power of a word.

Now, as things happen, Naaman was a leper. With a word, the servant girl tells Naaman that there is a prophet in Israel who could heal him, and after some preparation and permission from his king, he makes his way to Israel to visit with this prophet, Elisha.

The centurion, on the other hand, while not personally afflicted with anything that is mentioned, has a servant who is paralyzed and tormented. With a word, he pleads with Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus agrees, it appears from most translations, and tells the centurion that He will go to his house.

Naaman makes his way to Israel, with a letter from his king in hand; the letter bids the reader to heal the bearer. He brings money and fine clothing. He gives the letter to the king of Israel who, upon reading it, tears his clothes, fearing for his own life since he has no power or authority to kill and make alive again, much less heal a man of leprosy. He is sure that the king of Syria seeks to go to war. Elisha gets wind of the exchange and bids that Naaman come to him. Naaman makes his way to Elisha, stands ready at the door, and receives a message via a servant. "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean."

The centurion stops Jesus. He wants his servant healed, but he also doesn't want to put Jesus out. And what he says oozes with humility. "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof." This is not merely embarrassment over the state of the house, because the kids have left it a mess, and he doesn't want Jesus to see it. This is an acknowledgment that Jesus is someone wholly other, greater than He appears to be. In fact, this Gentile acknowledges that Jesus is God; he called Him Lord! And this is reinforced by what he says next: "But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed."

How does Naaman react? He's indignant. He received the Word of God—when Elisha, the man of God speaks, it is God speaking. He was told exactly what he needed to do, and his jaw hits the floor.

Indeed, I said to myself, "He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy." Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?

Naaman does not get what he expects, and if he continues to go away furiously indignant, he will continue to be a leper.

Jesus marvels at the faith of the Gentile centurion. "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" Anyone might expect, like Naaman, for God to wave His hands, do some rite, put on a show in order to perform a miracle. Not the centurion—he asked only for a simple word. "Then Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.' And his servant was healed that same hour."

Fortunately for Naaman, he was persuaded by his servant to wash in the Jordan. All the money, all the fine clothing, even the Abanah and Pharpar, didn't matter. God said, "Wash here, and you will be clean." He dips seven times in the Jordan as he was commanded, and his flesh was restored to that like a little child's. He was made whole again and new.

God said, "Wash here." God said, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." A little word—simple words—and miracles are performed. Leprosy is healed. Paralysis is undone. Torment is calmed. The mute speak. The deaf hear. The dead live again! A simple word, and the leper in Matthew 8 is also cleansed. "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." "I am willing; be cleansed."

God speaks words to you, too. They are simple words, but they produce miracles. So, he bids you listen to them. When Jesus came up out of the waters of His baptism, the voice from heaven echoed, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) These words were repeated at the Transfiguration of Jesus, with added emphasis. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. *Hear Him!*" (Matthew 17:5, emphasis mine) "Hear Him!" you could say is God's way of saying, "Do whatever He tells you." These are the very words you heard from His Mother, Mary, last week, when she turned to the servants after bringing to Jesus the news that the wedding feast had run out of wine. (cf. John 2:5)

So, do you hear Jesus when He speaks His simple words to you? Do you do whatever He tells you?

- Jesus says, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you..." (Matthew 28:18-20) Do you do what He tells you, or are you content to stay at home and not tell anyone what God has done in Christ? Are you afraid that someone very much not like you would be made a disciple of Christ like you? Do you become indignant like Naaman that an ordinary man says some words and pours a little water on someone, perhaps even an infant, and that person is made a child of God?
- Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17), and He promises absolution to those who repent. (cf. John 20:22-23) Do you do what He tells you, or do you simply mouth the words, thinking that you're okay, and that repentance is for someone worse off than you? Are you afraid that your sin is one that cannot and will not be forgiven? Do you become indignant at the command because no man can forgive sins in Jesus' stead, even though He said they would?
- Jesus says, "Take, eat," and "Take, drink," calling the bread His true body and the wine His true blood. (cf. Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) Do you do what He tells you, or do you refuse to eat every now and then because "you aren't feeling it?" Are you afraid that this holy meal would lose its significance and importance if you eat it "too often" (as if its significance and importance relied on your whims and feelings)? Do you become indignant at the thought that Jesus body is true food and Jesus blood is true drink, that a little piece of bread and a little sip of wine can give you forgiveness, life, and salvation?

And there are many other things that Jesus tells you to do. Love one another. Carrying one another's burdens. Do your work; see to your vocation. Hate no one in return for the hate that you have been shown, but turn the other cheek. Do not be quick to judge your brothers without first recognizing your own failings, misgivings, and sins. Do you do what Jesus tells you, or are you indignant, perhaps

furiously so, at what He says?

The frightening part of all of this is that there are consequences for that indignation. Jesus comes with a gracious invitation, and if you continue to be indignant at it, then, as He said, "[T]he sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Naaman would have remained a leper if, in his indignation, he continued to refuse washing in the Jordan. He was convinced by the word of a servant to heed the word of the prophet. What about you? What's it going to take?

Because the word of the prophet is that of God. And by the words of the prophet, Jesus graciously visits you. In Baptism, He makes you a son of God and gives you the gift of the Holy Spirit and faith in Him. In Absolution, He tells you again and again that you are forgiven for His sake, turning you back to see your Baptism and the cross at which He shed His blood to grant you forgiveness, life, and salvation. In Communion, He joins Himself to bread and wine in order to give you of His body and blood, the very tangible gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

You see, Jesus validates all of this with a word. He speaks a word, and things happen. He spoke a word, and the universe came into being. He spoke a word, and man came into being. He spoke a word, and you came into being His son and heir with Him of eternal life. You may wish to echo what the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof," especially—ironically—if you haven't taken Him at His word, "But only speak a word, and I will be healed."

What do you have to be healed from? Well, it's a leprosy of sorts. It's the indignation against the Word of God. Where you seek mighty miracles, Jesus speaks a simple word; so who wouldn't be indignant at that? Like Naaman and like the centurion, you have problems that you need God to correct. It may be a disease. It may be a different kind of personal issue. And with a word, Jesus can and does and will correct it all. It may not happen in this lifetime, but it will happen for the life to come. He is willing; be cleansed. As you have been given faith to believe, so let it be done for you.

That's why you're here. There are many words spoken here. Some of them "fix" you for a time. All of them "fix" you for the time to come. You are here to hear the words—the Word—and to receive Him who is the Word-made-flesh. These simple words, as much as they tell you what to do, tell you also of what He has done for you. He was incarnate for you, born and lived for you, died on the cross for you, rose again from the grave and ascended into heaven for you. And He will come again for you, to take you where He is, to live with Him forever. You have His word on that, the word which declares to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.