

Recovering the Bodies

2 Kings 5:1-15a

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. 2Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5And 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. 6He 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." 7When 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." 8But 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."

9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 11But 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! 12Are 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. 13But 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'?" 14So 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.

15Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."

Good morning, church. Let us begin by reaching overhead for a good morning stretch. Next, let us reach our arms to the side being mindful of our neighbors. Now wrap your arms around your own body. While continuing to hold yourself, drop forward as far as feels good, opening the back body and releasing the back of the neck. When you are ready, roll up slowly letting your head be the last part of your spine to return to uprightness, and then release your arms. Let us repeat those movements again, as a body prayer. We reach up drawing strength from the God who enlivens our lives and our justice. We reach out to bless the bodies of those around us who labor so that there is life and justice for others. We hug ourselves and bless our own bodies even as we grieve those we have lost this past year. We bow before our Creator, leaving all our anxieties and concerns in God's loving hands. Finally, we rise, slowly,

heads lifted and resolved to keep the faith. Release your hands and let us pray: Mighty God, we come remembering the saints – those who have gone on to glory this year and those from ages past. We come also with so much riding on these midterms elections. In the midst of our sorrow, in the midst of our anxiety, please keep spinning us back to the deep truth revealed in your word – namely that this is your world, and though the wrong seems often strong, you God are the ruler yet. Open that truth to us today. In the holy name of Jesus. Amen.

We are tracking two important events this morning - All Saints Sunday and Election Day. On this All Saints Sunday, we experience, in a powerful way, the presence of those who have gone home to be with God. This is who we speak of when we say the communion of saints, the great cloud of witnesses, the

ancestors...However you name them, they enrich our theological imagination and help us understand ourselves as members of a long line of faithful people, help us understand ourselves as participants in God's cosmic dance, help us understand ourselves as recipients of God's faithfulness.

For many of us whose people did not always enjoy the right to vote, All Saint's Sunday connects us with that same communion of saints, that same great cloud of witnesses, those same ancestors who struggled, organized, and even died to make voting rights our reality. We call their names and recover their bodies this morning – ancestors, whose deaths helped hasten passage of the federal Voting Rights Act. The Rev. James Reeb, Medgar Evers, Jimmie Lee Jackson, and Vernon Dahmer who announced on the radio that he would pay the poll tax for anyone who could not afford to register to

vote. For his generosity, the Ku Klux Klan firebombed his home, killing him. It is deeply meaningful to call the names of the saints, the ancestors and in a small way to recover these bodies this All Saint's Sunday, this Election Sunday, because it is all too easy to forget their sacrifice.

In this morning's story, we will do some recovering of bodies as well, highlighting the truth that God continues to speak from unexpected places through unlikely bodies. In this morning's healing story, God's voice certainly comes through loud and clear from God's prophet, Elisha, who tells the great man, Naaman, to go and wash! And...there is furthermore some other holy witnesses. We hear from the mouth of a young girl taken captive, from the mouth of the great man's wife, and finally from the mouths of the great man's servants. We do not typically lift up the bodies of these lesser characters

but Dr. Lisa L. Thompson reminded me recently of the importance of stepping into these ancient texts and into our own histories and recovering the bodies. The bodies of children and female identified folks, the bodies of those enslaved by systems that called some humans great and other humans their servants, the bodies of those precious and dear to God. Go back, church, this All Saint's Sunday, this Election Sunday and recover the stories by recovering the bodies.

We heard in abundant detail about the great man, Naaman, who is highly favored and victorious. Naaman is a mighty warrior, strong and powerful in body, respected in society, and no doubt used to getting what he wants...most great men are used to getting what they want...but Naaman...suffered from leprosy. His was a body that historically commanded other bodies, a body that took other bodies

captive, a body that demanded honor and respect. His body could, and did, get the King of Aram to write a letter on his behalf to the King of Israel...because Naaman...despite all his might and power...suffered...from leprosy... and he could not cure himself.

What was this great man to do? Well, Naaman took the advice of his wife, who learned, from the young girl, held captive in their home, that a prophet in Samaria could make him well. Therefore, off to Samaria, Naaman goes, with silver and gold and garments. He made quite a spectacular parade.

But when Naaman arrives at the prophet Elisha's door, he receives an oddly lukewarm...perhaps even cold reception, particularly for someone of his stature. Elisha does not appear at the door himself, instead, he sends a messenger, a

messenger who says to Naaman go and wash in the river seven times.

Naaman became angry, in fact the text says he went away in a rage! Wash in your river?! There are better rivers back where I came from. Why would I, the great warrior, Naaman, travel all this way with all this wealth to go wash in your river?

Naaman was expecting a little more red carpet and a little less informality, but Elisha was clear. He said to the King of Israel, "Let [Naaman] come to me, that he may *learn* that there is a prophet in Israel." You see Elisha wasn't big on words and he wasn't too particular about "important" bodies – he was big on action and he was big on showing folks the greatness of God. Naaman goes away in a rage as if he is shouting, "You must not know who I am!!!" But what Naaman doesn't know is who Elisha's God is!

Unlikely voices and unassuming bodies encourage the great man to follow the prophet's direction. The text says "his servants approached and said to him, "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? ...all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'." All our ancestors are saying to us is go and vote...Naaman goes to the river...

Naaman goes to the river, the river his comments suggested was defective, suggested was not as good as the rivers in his hometown, and he washes seven times. When he is finished, he has the skin of a young boy and from then on, he declares Elisha's God not only the greatest in Israel... but in all the earth.

The young unnamed captive girl has **knowledge** of the prophet of Israel. The unnamed wife brings that knowledge to

her husband. The unnamed servants boldly...almost teasingly cajole Naaman, the order giver, into taking orders himself – go and wash, they instruct him.

The bodies with the most to lose propel this morning's story forward to its miraculous and stunning conclusion. The bodies with the most to lose have often propelled the story of our great nation forward. Enslaved people, women, those on the underside of the societal power dynamic... reverse expectations of their place in the story and interrupt what was normal. They interrupt what was usual, probable, acceptable.

On this very special Sunday, as we prepare to gather at God's table, as we come expecting food for the journey, we come also remembering that we are not alone, church. We thank God for those who blazed trails making the seemingly impossible possible. We are mindful of stories and legacies;

passions and promises. We consider ourselves part of God's ongoing plan, a plan that does not end with death but imagines the saints in relationship with the living. We are not alone, church. When we recover the bodies, we experience the great cloud of witnesses, the unexpected voices, the unnamed characters in the biblical story and in our own stories who help us, like Naaman, achieve the healing and awareness that God intends. As we receive the bread and cup this morning, may we also receive God's power guiding our love and justice. May we intend to vote. And finally, when our time on earth is done and over, may we be found in the communion of saints, the great cloud of witnesses, walking with the ancestors. To God be the glory.