

# “Miracles”

Reading: **2 Kings 5:1-14** (with introduction)

Nativity United Church of Christ ~ February 15, 2009 ~ Philip Siddons

## Introduction to the text, prior to its reading

**T**he life of Elisha the prophet is fascinating. He lived in Israelite history when their nation was divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. This event took place about 800 years before the common era.<sup>1</sup> It tells of the healing of a man with leprosy.

Here are the events leading up to the story.

The writers of First and Second Kings thought their nation’s problems were brought about by the failures of the kings of the northern part of the land. Their problems, they believed, had come about because they had allowed religious leaders to adopt the idolatry of the surrounding nations. The idolatry, they argued, had desecrated their religion and culture.

Before, under King David and then Solomon his son, things were relatively stable, but gradually the people of the north came to feel that the administration had become too harsh and restrictive. Civil war had begun and the northern and southern kingdoms had split. The northern Kingdom called itself “Israel” and the southern was named “Judah.”

King Ahab, in the North, was the 7<sup>th</sup> king after the beginning of the Civil War and it was during his administration that the prophet Elijah entered the scene. Numerous miracles occurred in Elijah’s life. You probably recall childhood Sunday school lessons about Elijah’s great confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel — betting his God would light the altar fires before their god, Baal, would do it.

Sometime during Ahab’s reign, Elijah was mysteriously taken right up into heaven and Elisha became his successor as prophet. The entirety of Elisha’s life is found in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings<sup>2</sup> if you would like to read it in one sitting.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Common Era is a more neutral way to say “BC” out of respect for those nations and faith expressions who would not ordinarily mark their centuries according to the life of Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup> chapters 2-13

What a life Elisha had. He purified the polluted waters of Jericho. When two young males make fun of him, wild bears ran out of the woods and killed them.

Miraculously, Elisha filled a poor widow’s canisters with new oil. He resurrected to life the dead son of another woman. He purified poisonous food. On one occasion, he fed 100 people with only a few loaves of bread. And then there was this miracle story of the healing of Naaman.

Naaman was an army commander for the King of Aram. To keep the characters straight, in one of their raids on Israel, Naaman captured a little Jewish girl and she ended up as a house servant for his wife — but this little girl remembered hearing of Elisha’s miracles in her home country. So this is where our text begins.

**[2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 5:1-14 is read]**

<sup>3</sup> Ahab, by now, had to cope with the powerful armies coming down on them from Syria to their north and east. At one point, Ahab had joined forces with the southern Judean armies and they fought the invaders off, even capturing a king — but they ended up letting him go instead of executing him.

You may recall that Ahab and his wife Jezebel killed an innocent man named Naboth — just to acquire his vineyard. Ahab was finally killed in battle and for the rest of Elisha’s life, Jehoshaphat was the King. Perhaps this king had a personal interest in the field and track event of the broad jump to have accounted for the idiom associated with his name?

The rest of Elisha's life was just as spectacular. After Naaman left, cured of his leprosy, Elisha's servant<sup>4</sup> noticed his master had turned down Naaman's offer of a reward. The servant caught up with Naaman's caravan, asked for the money and actually received it but he ended up getting leprosy himself.

Later, Elisha made an axe head float to the surface of a river to save a poor man the loss of the costly tool. He caused a band of Syrian raiders to go blind so they could be captured. He was asked by the king of northern Israel to end a famine. He accomplished that as well as causing enemies surrounding the city to flee in the middle of the night.

Elisha saw to it that an inheritance was returned to a widow who properly owned it.<sup>5</sup> And get this: after Elisha died, they buried him but as his body touched another corpse (already in the grave), that corpse resurrected to life. Imagine trying to make a movie of Elisha's life – even Steven Spielberg would be challenged.

But back to the text. Naaman first heard of a source for healing through a captured house servant girl – not through one of his widely-traveled and knowledgeable military generals or international merchants. He had obtained a safe-conduct pass from his king, guaranteeing safety as he traveled through the alien territories in search of a cure for his disease. And Naaman brought the equivalent of several years wages in currency and goods because he knew money talks. He anticipated that he would have to bribe people in order to gain access to those with power.

As this powerful general stood before this Israelite king, the king excused himself to consult with his advisors, terrified of what this foreign general would do to him if he couldn't find him a cure.<sup>6</sup> But Elisha was close to the matters of the court and offered to help by curing Naaman.

Naaman was used to people coming to him but because of the severity of his disease, even he was willing to go to

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<sup>4</sup> Gehazi

<sup>5</sup> He correctly predicted the next King of Syria.

<sup>6</sup> He probably said "We're done – he actually thinks I'm some kind of god to be able to get him healed – as if we have power over life and death. It's probably a trick and as soon as we can't help him, he'll start a war with us using that as an excuse. We're goners."

the home of this healer-prophet. To his surprise, however, Elisha sent one of his messengers out with instructions about the bathing cure and Naaman got angry. He had come all that way and there was no personal appearance by the wonder worker – no magic words or smoky rituals conducted over his diseased skin.

Now if you or I had cancer, say, wouldn't we expect a renown surgeon from Roswell<sup>7</sup> to calmly wave his hands over us and confidently speak medical jargon, assuring us that it all will be controlled and eliminated with the latest technology? Of course we would hope for and expect that. But Elisha's instructions to bathe in the muddy Jordan River made him feel as if he was being told to jump in the lake by this prophet – who didn't have to make house calls. And contrary to Naaman's expectations, the river bath worked and this miracle worker did it for free.

In reflection, Naaman had everything at his fingertips that the world could offer – but was still suffering. And God's grace came to him in the form of healing through unexpected channels. They came through means that were very outside of his expectations and agenda. Now today, we are pretty judgmental of the Biblical characters – at least I am. We tend to think of the people in the Bible as if they are in some kind of video that has little to do with our life and times. How often have we said, in the midst of a Biblical story with a miracle, "That was dumb of them not to have faith after all they've seen?"

In our minds, they are all sort of hapless characters in weird and supernatural stories who appeared to be clueless and who just didn't seem to get it – no matter what miracle was performed right in front of them. I've always judged the disciples to be somewhat dim witted – people who should have figured it out because they had had first-hand experience in seeing Jesus heal or resurrect people right in front of their eyes. I mean, if Lazarus was your friend or relative – who was brought back from the dead – would you ever worry about anything for the rest of your life?

Well *they* did; and the people closest to Jesus, who seemed to be His groupies (with front row seats on some of the most spectacular miracles in human history) – they ended up fighting like jealous adolescents over who was

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<sup>7</sup> Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, New York

to be more important when Jesus came into power. They ran like frightened children into the woods when the temple guards and mob came with Judas.

As for Naaman, I can be a little easier on him. It wasn't as if he was an Elisha groupie all his life and had seen one miracle after another. He got the tip about this healer from the little Jewish housemaid working for his wife. And yea, we don't like the fact that he and his wife had slaves. But today, . . . what would it take for **you and me** to "get it"?

If you and I sincerely believe that we live out our lives in the very presence of the Almighty Creator of the Universe – and that this Infinite and Eternal and Unchangeable Being (is a personal and loving Being – who happens to be crazy with love for us) . . . what is it going to take for us to really get it?

Well, what do you mean by "get it?" you ask silently, legally and intellectually.

Suppose some miracle worker or prophet or holy person from up in Niagara county said that our freshly diagnosed cancer will go away if we just got a blanket and pillow and spent the night in the trunk of our car? Would we do it, . . . out of faith.

Ok, so it's fair for you to say that we don't have a miracle worker, prophet or an officially certified holy person in our life. So no one is telling us to just spend the night in the trunk of our car to get healed.

But where is the reality of God's presence in our lives? Where is God now in your life? What do we have to do to really "get it" in order to live out our lives and maybe get a miracle or two somewhere between our baptism and death?

Are you looking for a miracle, like the one Naaman got, in getting rid of his leprosy? Maybe you or a loved one has some kind of threatening abnormality or dangerously degenerative medical condition? Maybe you're staring at a personal economic disaster so bad that you're wondering if you're going to lose *everything* you have? Maybe you have experienced such sadness in what was your closest relationship – such brokenness – that you think it is going to kill you (and you're surprised that it hasn't) because nothing is left of what you used to think defines you as a person.

None of the folks who stand up here on Sunday

mornings can make God real (but there have been a number of times when Linda and I have been grateful for the spiritual direction we've received from Dan and Ruth. But how about Elisha; if only he were here today or St. Peter?

Take Peter. This kills me.

Peter was preaching, one day, and there was a guy named Eutychus who fell asleep in an upstairs window ledge listening to him speak.<sup>8</sup> In his sleep, he fell out of the ledge to the ground – Varumph! – and he died. But Peter came over and resurrected him from the dead. *Puff*, . . . he's alive from the dead.

But what is it going to take for *us* to get it, . . . some kind of miracle that is so extraordinary that it would make our heads spin? What would it take to convince you that you are deeply loved by the One Who made you and in thousands of ways (that you don't even know), God is present in your life and is watching over you right now?

Well, wake up (if you will), because at this very moment, you are sitting – surrounded by a whole bunch of other people who are here, only because in ways we can't easily explain, we have found the reality of the presence of God in our lives. And we aren't any better than anyone else. And I can tell you that most of my life I have been even more clueless than the disciples ever seemed to be.

But despite all of our fears and doubts, our cynicism and arrogance; our aggressive insistence on stomping through our lives – putting material things, technology, position and *control* ahead of our mindfulness of God's presence in life; . . . despite all of the know-it-all-ness and our astounding self-centeredness, . . . none of our shortsightedness or fearfulness has taken anything away from Who God is. Despite all of our cluelessness – bidden or unbidden, called or uncalled, known or unknown – God is present in your life now.

It's just sad that two hours from now, we'll have our minds on something else; . . . living as if we have no idea that we are standing and sitting and playing and reading and watching TV in the presence of the One Who is going to keep loving us beyond when time is bothered to be measured." But if we can stay mindful of that, we'll "get it." So here is the point where our thinking and

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 20:19

expectations can shift.

We can stop looking for a miracle worker from Rochester or Niagara or Orleans county – *someone not from around here*. We should stop looking for someone else to be the agent of God’s miraculous deeds.

Instead, . . . do it yourself. That’s right, be God’s hands and realize that you can be an agent of the great reversal of fortunes. That’s what miracles are – circumstances where beyond most people’s expectations, the tables are turned and beauty and healing comes out of suffering and despair to people who have lost all hope.

If you are a nurse or healthcare worker or friend of someone ill, be the one God puts by the side of this ill person and make them feel they are touched and cared about. The time you place your hand on their shoulder and are meaningfully present in conversation with them – you’re bringing light to their darkness. You’re helping in the healing but you be the one.<sup>9</sup>

At the office, the few people in the next cubes with whom you trade funny comments, coupons and computer how-to tips during the day – are you mindfully present with their needs? Do you look at them as if you would look at your son or daughter, brother or sister? Do you hear the pain between the lines of their stories about their kids or spouse? Do you sense their despair over things they would like to have accomplished with their lives but couldn’t? Do your words to them convey the sense that you know God loves them unconditionally, even though they might not be mindful of that? If asked, could you tell them your three or four most important things that make your life have meaning?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> And if you want to learn how to be more present in life, attend the meditation class at this church at the Himalayan Institute on Delaware Avenue. In meditation you learn how to be truly present with yourself, with others and with God. This helps you be more mindful of God’s presence with you. But you have to practice it to deepen that experience and make it part of your life.

It may come down to this; if we go down on a plane someday and our lives are abruptly ended, will be people we leave behind remember that we were truly present in their lives?

<sup>10</sup> The four most important things I usually suggest to children and adults are: ❶ Making God special is the beginning of being smart, ❷ God loves you no matter what, ❸ Always remember other people’s feelings and ❹ Do the very best you can at everything you do. How about you?

So next and very quickly we ask, how can we be more mindful, in our spiritual journey, of God’s presence in our lives?

The answer is compassion in response to need.

Start with your excess capacity. This is no news flash: You and I have more than we need. You are really good at some things. It might have taken you years of experience and responsibility but you are gifted in some areas of your life. It’s time to unwrap your gifts Use your ability to help others who need it. Volunteer (as many of you already do). Donate your services, on the side, to a non-profit that can’t afford to pay for people with your level of experience. Make their mission and goals the same as your own by giving your skills.

You have some extra money and let’s face it, when you are in the checkout line at Tops or Wegmans, more probably at Tops, look behind you. There’s probably a person fumbling through their food stamps, nervously looking in their wallet or purse to see if they have enough. You see this person only because *God is tapping you on the shoulder and making you realize that they are living pretty close to the edge*. Watch for this, pay attention, because *you are supposed to see it*.

When you pay for your own food at the register, hand the cashier an extra fifty or twenty-five and quietly tell them to pay for the person behind you and give them the change. Then quickly walk straight out of the store, get in your car, drive away and don’t look back. When you do, you are the hands of God and a surprise free bag of groceries, to a frightened person barely making it, is a miracle that beats floating axe heads any day.

You already know where the need is in your neighborhood and family circle. You just have to pay attention to the need and touch the people involved with your compassion. Because your compassion is your conduit to the actual and working presence of our loving God.

So whether it is some compassion and empathy for someone who comes to the “Friends of the Night People,” or a disenfranchised and discouraged colleague work; . . . or someone whose path you have crossed who is clearly needy, . . . Look for the need. Pause to tap into your compassion because that’s where God’s Spirit is hanging out. Be mindful that the very reason you have encountered them was worked out by God and you don’t

want to miss this unique chance to compassionately respond to this person's need.

When you do, you will see God in your compassion and in their eyes. When you do it to whom some would call the "least," you are doing it to someone with God's Spirit in them. It's how you and I have already experienced miracles in our own lives.

Be used by God to make it happen in other's lives today. It's your calling. It's your life's mission. It is why we were born and live and why you and I were given excess capacity.

