

2 Kings 5:1-14

If you were asked to make a list of a few of the best things that ever happened to you, you would probably include your baptism, your marriage (if you are married), and the birth of your children (if you have children). You might also list graduations, the receiving of awards, advancements in a job. But would you give any thought to listing an illness? Would a disease, a hospital stay, an injury that was painful, have any chance of making your list?

It would for Naaman. We meet him in our Old Testament lesson for today. A Syrian military commander, Naaman was highly respected by his king. He was a valiant warrior. He had won many victories for the land of Syria (or Aram). If Naaman were to tell his life story, his achievements as a soldier would no doubt be listed, but at the top of the list, very likely, Naaman would put down as one of the best things that ever happened to him—the day he became a leper.

Why? It's very simple. Take away his leprosy and you take away the thing that led him to Christ. It's not that Naaman rejoiced the day it became apparent that he had contracted this dread disease. He surely thought it was a scourge, a curse perhaps. And yet, God allowed leprosy to come to Naaman as a blessing to him.

Today there is a treatment for leprosy, but back then it was incurable. It was a painful disease which struck the nerves on the skin. A person having leprosy became hideous to look upon. Eventually he would die from it.

A little Israelite girl, a servant of Naaman's wife, told him about a prophet living in the land of Samaria who could heal him. You heard the story in 2 Kings how Naaman eventually ends up at Elisha's door. You heard how he washed in the Jordan River and was cured of his disease. You did not hear (it's recorded in the verses later in the same chapter) that Naaman, after his cleansing, took two mule loads of dirt back home with him. He was going to build an altar to the God of Israel. "From now on," he said, "I will not worship other gods, but only the Lord." Naaman had become a believer in the true God, and it all began the day he became a leper.

God is in the habit of working through things that we despise. 9/11 was a tragedy for our country, but through that act of terrorism many people came through the doors of churches here in America. And although many of them did not stay, some did. For them, 9/11, as tragic as it was, became one of the best things that ever happened to them. While we are busy asking, "What good can come from this tragedy, or this sickness, or this death?" God is busy working through these things to bring the lost to Jesus Christ.

A little girl was kidnapped many years ago. She was taken from her family and forced to live as a slave in a strange land. "A terrible thing," we say. And yet, through this evil, God brought Naaman to the Savior. For that little girl in that strange land is the little girl in 2 Kings who shared with Naaman the hope for a cure from his disease. How her parents must have wept for their daughter. But in the midst of their sorrow God was at work to rescue a lost soul, and very likely, through Naaman then, to bring many more in Syria to the true faith.

Can you point to a day in your life that would rank at the very bottom of the list? One of the very worst days in your life? Perhaps several of these come to mind. Friend, with God there is no such thing as a “bad day.” For He is always working by His grace through His powerful Word to seek and to save lost sinners, through the best and the worst events in life. Even the day when God’s Son was brutally beaten and nailed to a cross is a day that is “Good”—the day when sin, death, and hell were conquered for you.

At first, Naaman may have pointed to the day he became a leper as the worst day in his life. Later on he came to the awareness that just the opposite was true. And even when Naaman arrived at Elisha’s door he was yet to see his disease as a blessing. He did not yet see how the true God works through those things that we normally despise. For when Elisha, through his servant, told Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan River, Naaman became very angry. How is a “God” supposed to work through such a simple thing! Naaman despised the prophet’s message. He despised what God had commanded. He refused to believe in a “God” that would heal him through nothing more than a bath!

We are no different from Naaman. Our sinful mind scoffs at God’s promise to forgive sins in the waters of Holy Baptism. Such a simple thing! Baptism does not look powerful. We prefer to point to ourselves and not to simple water. Our decision to believe, our works for Christ, our willingness, our actions, our efforts—we, too, are Naaman when we replace God’s clear Word with anything inside of us.

But friend, Naaman was not cured because of anything inside of him. Even though he was fighting against God’s invitation and promise, God led him, through his servants, to that simple river water and there God healed his disease. And so has God led you, fighting and kicking though we are, to the simple water of Baptism, and there in that water His Word of Grace cleanses you from the leprosy of your sin. You, dear sinner, are forgiven! Not by your choice or effort, not because of anything inside of you—through Water and Word, God has made you clean.

Do not doubt your Baptism. Do not despise what God has done for you in Christ. Naaman once despised the water of the Jordan. He saw God’s command, through His prophet, to wash in that water, as an insult to his intelligence. He later saw how wrong he had been.

Just as Satan tried to keep Naaman from those cleansing waters, so he today works hard to have us think little of our Baptism, and to prevent children and adults from coming to its cleansing bath. Satan does not want you to remember your Baptism daily. He does not want you to believe that because you are baptized into Christ, you are continuously forgiven of your sins. Satan would have you believe that you are hideous in God’s sight; that you are still covered with the leprosy of sin; that your Baptism bath did nothing for you.

Take comfort from the story of Naaman. God included this story in the Scriptures so that we sinful lepers would be strengthened in our faith by God’s saving action for us in Holy Baptism. You are not hideous in God’s eyes. You are washed in the bath of Christ. Even though you sin daily, you are clean before God. He has washed every bit of sin’s leprosy away.

And as this is true for you, so is it true for all who are within our Lord’s Church. It is easy, when looking at each other, to see the sin that still clings to our flesh. We need to look at

each other, therefore, in Christ—as fellow baptized, forgiven, children of God. Since God does not see our sin, why should we notice our neighbor’s sin? Since God declares us forgiven in Christ, that is how we want to treat each other. We may be a leper colony, but we are a colony of forgiven lepers. We are God’s family—sinful hearts and lives, yes, but completely forgiven in Baptism’s cleansing waters. We, like Naaman, can rejoice in our spiritual cleansing and now live for Him who acts in Baptism on our behalf, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.