

Greetings to you! Today we are celebrating youth Sunday and we are grateful to our young people for leading and participating in the service and our theme for this morning is, "God suffers in all those who suffer in this world." Many of us have gone through terrible times of suffering and some of you are probably going through times of suffering and are wondering whether God understands your suffering and will do something about it. Throughout the earthly ministry of Jesus, we see that Jesus was moved with compassion whenever he saw anyone who was sick or suffering and healed them. In a similar manner we see in the Old Testament that God always moves with compassion and suffers in all these who suffer in this world.

In the Old Testament reading from the book of Kings we are given to read about Naaman a commander of the army of the king of Aram. The text tells us that he was a commander, he was a great man in the sight of his master and that he was a highly valiant soldier and Yahweh had given him victory to Aram through him. Here we see that Naaman has great credentials but he owes his reputation and status to the Lord's special favor. However there was one short coming. Naaman was a patient of leprosy. The condition is not advanced for he is still serving in the king's army.

Now on the other side there was a little girl whom the raiders of Aram had taken as a captive from Israel she served Naaman's wife. The text doesn't give us her name but just that she was a young girl. However she was a strong believer in Yahweh the God of Israel. She tells her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would be cured of his leprosy."

The contrast between the little girl and Naaman is quite stark: she is an Israelite while he is an Aramean; she is a young girl while he is a great man; she is a captive while he is the commander of the army; he is highly regarded by the king while she simply served Naaman's wife. But the young girl is the one who advises that Elisha can cure her master. The young girl has the heart of God because she herself suffered with her master's suffering. She was moved with compassion even though he was a captive and desperately wanted her master to be healed. It is interesting to note that this message was communicated to Naaman by his wife and he believed it.

So Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. The king told Naaman that he would send a letter to the King of Israel. When the King of Israel received this letter he interpreted the matter in political terms and expressed his despair by tearing his clothes. He says, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured from leprosy? See how he is trying to quarrel with me!"

However, Elisha heard about this and asks the King to send him to him. The grand convoy of the second in command of Aram went beside the modest home of Elisha. As part of the payment for his service Naaman brought rich gifts -the silver alone was five times the price paid for the land on which the city of Samaria was built. Naturally he expects immediate personal attention. However Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself in the Jordan and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

In his rage at the disrespect shown to him, Naaman hardly registered the message that was given to him. He wanted Elisha to come out and stand before him call on the name of the Lord, wave his hand over the spot and cure him from his leprosy. Naaman's behavior and expectations match those of many who are in positions of authority. Politicians and Church leaders demand that others pay them undue reverence. Christian leaders forget that they are to be "eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you" (1 Peter 5:2-3)

The healing of Naaman becomes centered on God who acts directly rather than the prophet coming out. Naaman was angry that he had asked him to go and dip in the Jordan and was saying that there were better rivers in Damascus. However we see that the servants tactfully cajole him to do what Elisha told him to do. Naaman finally gives in and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times. His flesh was restored and became clean like a young boy. From Naaman's experience of the divine hand comes the greatest of all conversion confessions in the Old Testament: "Now I know there is no God in the world except Israel."

The New Testament reading from the gospel according to Mark shows how a man with leprosy was cleansed. The man was apprehensive whether Jesus would even come near him because he was a patient of leprosy and was considered as an untouchable who had to live outside the city limits. However, Jesus reached out to him and touched him because of his compassion. Jesus too reveals God's compassionate heart as he suffers with those who suffer and breathes healing in to them.

The disciples continued this work of healing which is recorded for us in the book of Acts. They too were moved with compassion and hence interceded for people to bring healing in their lives. We too as a church are called to suffer with those who suffer and be moved with compassion, intercede for them and ask God to heal them. May we as a Church truly be a healing community.