
“Something Difficult”

A SERMON on 2nd Kings 5:1-14 for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 3 July 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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In December 1914, there probably wasn't much that felt worth celebrating. Over the preceding decade or two, simmering tensions, building anxieties, insatiable aspirations for power, and understandable desires for independence had all worked together to turn the stability and peace of Europe into a “house of cards”¹, ready to topple over from the slightest tremor. And then, of course, in June of 1914 came an assassination. Then, the accusations and the assurances, the miscalculations and the mobilizations... and by early August, the Great War—what we now know as World War I—was underway.

The plan on Germany's part, facing land borders with opposing powers on both sides, had been to first knock out France to the west, quickly, right off the bat, and then turn attention to Russia in the east. Some had even said that the whole endeavour, at least on the western front, could be over by Christmas.

Well, as we all now know from history, the war lasted four years, not four months. Not only was it not over by December, but by that point, the two sides were already locked into a highly costly and yet mostly fruitless stalemate, with forces literally “dug in” to their respective trenches. Sworn enemies faced off across a no-man's-land of only a few dozen metres, and neither could get an upper hand on the other.

And yet, even in the midst of this dank, dirty, death-filled, and dehumanizing existence, somehow on an evening in that late December cold, something like a Christmas tree popped up, shining, from a German trench. And the melody of singing could be heard... a Christmas carol. And then another. One account from a British soldier said that the Germans would sing one of theirs, and the British would follow with one of theirs, and so on and so forth until someone hit on “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” with both sides knew—the Germans singing the original Latin, “Adeste Fideles”—and so all joined in together.

So began what became known as the Christmas Truce of 1914. It didn't happen everywhere along the western front, and it looked different in different places. But at least in some places, there was this brief break in the fighting, a little “blip” of only a few hours or maybe a full day, interrupting the horrors with soldiers from each side emerging from their trenches, meeting one another, sharing trinkets, kicking a soccer ball around. A small snippet on that day of simply recognizing and sharing together in their common humanity, and all of it among men who just a few hours earlier had been inflicting so much suffering and pain upon one another.²

¹ An idiom in English that means “a structure, situation, or institution that is insubstantial, shaky, or in constant danger of collapse.”

² More about the “Christmas Truce of 1914” can be found via the Imperial War Museum in London UK (<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-real-story-of-the-christmas-truce>), the National Veterans Memorial and Museum in Columbus, Ohio, USA (<https://nationalvmm.org/what-was-the-world-war-i-christmas-truce/>), and *Time* (<https://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>), among other sources.

As our scripture reading for this morning opened, we were introduced to a figure who himself had already inflicted quite a bit of suffering upon the people from whose perspective the story comes. Naaman commanded the army, it said, of “the king of Aram,” Aram being one of Israel’s immediate neighbours, encompassing the southwestern portion of what today we call Syria and having the city of Damascus as its capital. Not only was Naaman the commander of the army of a neighbouring kingdom with whom Israel fought regularly, today’s passage told us that the Arameans, under Naaman’s command, had recently won against Israel. Furthermore, it said that in the course of that battle or campaign, there had been multiple raids by the Arameans against the Israelites and such raids included (as they often do) taking civilians captive. All of this is to say, Naaman wasn’t someone that the Israelites had much reason to like. In fact, Naaman had been the cause for them of plenty of disruption, defeat, disappointment, dehumanization, and even death.

Despite his accomplishments as a military commander, Naaman suffered a dehumanization of his own, as he lived with some sort of skin disease—something that many English translations of the Bible have called “leprosy,” even though the original wording *blanketly*³ referred to any number of skin diseases and conditions. Back in those ancient times, these sorts of skin diseases weren’t only a source of physical pain or discomfort; they were a cause of shame and social ostracization, at times leading to very dehumanizing existences. While it doesn’t sound like Naaman was subjected to the most extreme forms of this, his condition was undoubtedly a source of embarrassment, and even shame, nevertheless.

Directions to a new road, one that that might lead to healing, emerge from the mouth of another character in the story whose humanity was dismissed and denied: the enslaved Israelite girl in forced servitude to Naaman’s wife. The road leads Naaman to seek healing from among the very people whom he had been fighting against.

Transformations and healings take time, of course, whether we’re talking about changes in body or changes in mind and spirit. And Naaman needed both. After all, upon arriving at the house of the celebrated prophet Elisha—Elisha being the successor to Elijah, who we heard about a couple of weeks ago—when Naaman gets there and Elisha doesn’t even talk directly with him, but simply sends out a servant to tell Naaman to go wash in the nearby River Jordan, Naaman “leaves in a huff, muttering about the superiority of his own land.”⁴ As one wise scholar and pastor puts it, “He appears oblivious to the possibility that the Israelite prophet does not *want* to meet a man who has caused so much suffering or that Elisha’s response gives him a dose of his own dehumanizing medicine.”⁵ Nevertheless, as we heard in the story, Elisha’s suggested treatment of going and washing in the Jordan River works, and Naaman’s condition is healed. Even if Elisha isn’t eager to sit down with Naaman for tea and biscuits, still Elisha honours the humanity at Naaman’s core and offers him a path that leads to healing. Enemies, even enemies

³ *blanketly*: adverb meaning “In a blanket manner: in a manner that covers or encompasses all of the things under consideration (sometimes despite differences among the various things)”

⁴ L. Daniel Hawk, Commentary on 2 Kings 5:1-14 for 3 July 2022, *WorkingPreacher.org*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-14-3/commentary-on-2-kings-51-14-8>.

⁵ Hawk, *ibid*. Emphasis original to source.

that have caused pain, suffering, and death, are nevertheless human beings worthy of caring and kindness.

The arguably scandalous importance of Naaman's story echoes down through the centuries, especially in the Gospel of Luke that we'll hear a lot from through the rest of this summer. In Jesus' inaugural sermon to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he "lifts up Naaman as an illustration of the expansive scope of God's love,"⁶ causing the congregation to turn against him. Later on in the story, Jesus heals a Roman centurion's slave and another centurion praises God while proclaiming Jesus' innocence at the cross. And then as the story continues onward into the early church, it's yet a third Roman centurion who becomes the first Gentile recipient of the Holy Spirit.

One of the most memorable moments in this story about Naaman's healing comes when some of his own servants point out that he's being a bit of a bonehead. "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?" they say. "How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" Perhaps you've had such moments, when you've invested far too much time or energy or emotional distress into a situation when just a simple action would have resolved the whole matter; I know I have!

But here's the thing... I think all along the path of this story Naaman stepped out and did the difficult thing. Sure, go wash in the river... that was, indeed, easy. But put away your national pride that sees your own rivers as better than *their* rivers? That's more difficult. Move past your ethnic conflict and recognize that healing could come from among the people you were fighting against just a moment ago? That's more difficult. See the common humanity worthy of connecting with, in the foreign prophet and the lowly servant and the enslaved female? That's more difficult. More difficult *and*, ultimately, more transformative.

In the history of World War I, something like the Christmas Truce of 1914 never happened again. There were three more Christmases during the course of that war, but never again a Christmastime reprieve from fighting, or soldiers from both sides of the front sharing in holiday revelry. And there's a very good reason for that: it would have ended the war, and that would not have been in the interests of the politicians and powerful men at the head of the command. As soldiers sang carols together and shared gifts across the battle lines, they shared in a common humanity with one another that questioned why they were even fighting one another in the first place. Dug in as close, in some cases, as less than half a city block from one another, "enemy troops were so close that they could hear each other and even smell their cooking."⁷ And indeed, "one British soldier, Murdoch M. Wood, speaking in 1930, said: 'I then came to the conclusion that I have held very firmly ever since, that if we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired.'"⁸ British and German commanders explicitly prohibited any such "friendly intercourse with the enemy" in the aftermath of Christmas 1914. After all, how do you defeat an

⁶ Hawk, *ibid.*

⁷ Naina Bajekal, "Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce of 1914," *Time.com*, 24 December 2014, <https://time.com/3643889/christmas-truce-1914/>

⁸ Bajekal, *ibid.*

enemy if your soldiers are unwilling to fight them, having come and met them in their full humanity?

Ultimately, my friends, something like that is the great good news of our Christian faith itself. Not simply, or at least not *only*, that we should try to be more like some of these figures we hear about in the Bible who saw past the boundaries and borders... after all, there are plenty of other people throughout the Bible who do exactly the opposite. The story of humanity given in our scriptures is *messy*, at best—just like it still is today. No, the great good news of our Christian faith is that God—God’s very self—has come and met us in our full humanity, not to decimate or destroy us, but to bring us to life. Even for all our brokenness and betrayals, God keeps coming back to and for us... and did so ultimately and decisively in Jesus, entering fully into the depths of our human life and our human pain, so that no part of our existence has gone untouched by the presence of the divine.

And still today, even right here in this very room, Christ’s presence still comes among us, seeing us in and for the fullness of who we are, and loving us unconditionally in it. In words of promise spoken, in the embrace of stranger and friend, in waters of grace that wash over us, in bread broken and shared: Jesus Christ extends God’s very self across a no-mans-land to be with us and among us and for us. “You are loved,” all of these things proclaim. You are loved.

And so, my friends, to this table: come. Come. O Come, let us adore him: Christ the Lord.

Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.