



## Another Way; an Inner Strength; Grace from God

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
The Feast of Absalom Jones ~ February 15, 2009*

### II Kings 5:1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And 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. He 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.' When 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.'

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

### Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

At least once in our lives, if not with some frequency, we find that we have apparently run out of options: when we feel completely stuck with no where to turn, or abandoned with no help in sight. Yet, it is at such junctures that we might discover another way, might discern an inner strength, might receive grace from God. I have had a number of conversations in recent weeks with people who are finding themselves at this juncture: up against the wall.

This is what happened to Naaman. We can see it if we read between the lines. He was a powerful military general, commander of the armies of present day Syria accustomed to giving orders and getting things done. Mighty he was, but tragically flawed for he suffered from leprosy.

Among his wife's servants was a young girl who had been taken captive from the land of Israel during one of the General's raids. Aware of her master's disease, the servant girl told her mistress of a great prophet in Israel who could heal him.

The fact that Naaman even entertained the idea of going off to find this foreign healer reveals something of his plight. Surely, he had already explored the options that were known, predictable, respectable, suitable for a man of his stature. He must have already explored and exhausted each of these. So he went, first – mistakenly – to the king of Israel – royalty seeking royal treatment. But the king knew nothing about it.

Elisha, the prophet, learned that Naaman was in the land; he sent word and had Naaman come to him. So the General arrived in his finery with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent out a messenger, who told him to go wash seven times in the Jordan River.

Naaman was outraged: first that Elisha did not come in person to deliver the message to such a mighty personage as himself, and second that the proposed method for healing was a mere Israelite folk remedy. 'If I'd wanted to wash in a river, I certainly didn't need to come all this way to do so! We have perfectly good rivers at home!'

Can you picture him? "What was I thinking?! Coming all this way to see some foreign nut-job – who was recommended by my wife's servant. What has become of me?!"

'But, my Lord...' Again, his servants intervene: 'If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, you would have done it. At least give this a try.' So he went and washed seven times, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

The story serves primarily to make clear that Elisha is a powerful prophet, to show that when God's power breaks forth healing occurs, and that such healing will open our eyes and turn us – reorient us – to worship the one true God. But the climax of the narrative hinges upon a couple of moments of desperation when he thought, "I can't do this myself; I have no where to turn; from where, from whom, is my help to come?" Perhaps that moment is correctly described as a choice, a decision. Perhaps it is more accurately described as a discovery, a moment of recognition that there is another way, a willingness to trust in the gift of grace being offered.

Jesus' healing of the leper gives us the language: "If you choose, you can make me clean," said the leper. "I do choose," answered Jesus. The leper had already chosen, chosen Jesus. It appears the leper chose to seek Jesus' healing touch, although of course, the leper had no choice; there was no choice, no healing to be found from any quarter, so he chose to trust in the gift of grace being offered; he chose Jesus: "If you choose." "I do choose."

Let me tell another story: In the Episcopal Church this week we commemorate the life of one of our saints: Absalom Jones. Absalom Jones was born in Delaware in 1746. Of African ancestry, he was born into slavery. While still a young boy, he and his brothers, sisters, mother and father were separated from one another, each sold to different owners. Absalom's owner, a man named Wynkoop, moved to Philadelphia. Slight of build and bright, Absalom was kept working in the house and in Wynkoop's shop. He taught himself to read, and read everything he could find. He fell in love with a woman, an enslaved African-American woman, who was owned by a neighbor. They married. After many years, Absalom managed to save enough to purchase first his wife's freedom, then his own.

Mr. Wynkoop and his family sat in pew 103 on Sunday mornings; Absalom Jones and his wife would have been forced to sit in the benches along the back, west wall. They were married here.

Jones and his good friend Richard Allen started the Free African Society, providing support for the black community, especially widows and orphans. The Society worshiped together at St. George's Methodist Church. One day, as they knelt in prayer, white trustees ordered the black members to go sit in the gallery. As they attempted to pull him to his feet, Absalom Jones said, "Wait until the prayer is over, and I will trouble you no more." After the prayer, the black members walked out, never to enter again. They started two new congregations: Allen organized Mother Bethel; Jones remained with the Episcopal Church and founded St. Thomas'.

He sought to be ordained, but men with black skin were not acceptable for ordination in the Episcopal Church at that time. Our rector, William White, who was also the bishop, opposed ordaining him. White eventually relented, being persuaded by friends, and Absalom Jones was ordained as a deacon here, then as a priest at Christ Church – the first in this new nation.

One of the more widely known activities of the Free African Society was their care of the sick and dying during the horrible yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Anyone with means fled the city, but the poorest – both black and

white – were left to fend for themselves. Allen and Jones took up the cause, and gave selflessly not only for members of the Society but principally for the white population, who'd been abandoned by their own.

It is almost unfathomable to imagine Absalom Jones' depth and fortitude, what it must have taken as an individual to be told "no" at every step of his life, and to persevere nonetheless; not only to persevere, but to do so with generosity and grace. To begin, enslaved, stripped from your family. To want your bride's freedom and your own; be told "no," and pursue it until done. To believe you had rights when everyone told you otherwise. To believe that you had gifts from God for ministry, yet the single-most powerful person in the church told you no.

At some very deep level, Absalom must have made a choice and heeded a voice, received a gift, that said: you can do this; all shall be well.

"If you take care of victims with yellow fever, you'll get the fever and die." "Perhaps so, yet I shall not succumb; all shall be well."

"You are no more than 3/5's of a man." "That's what you say. But I shall live into the fullness of the man that I am."

"There is no place for you in ordained ministry." "The church has not found this possible, yet I believe God may use me as a priest."

How could he have the strength? A choice? A decision perhaps? Or a discovery. A moment of recognition; a willingness to trust in the powerful gift of grace being offered.

Finally, two recent stories from conversations this week.

A friend of mine just received a very scary medical diagnosis, of cancer. It doesn't look good. He knew the prognosis was not favorable, but the doctor recently confirmed that his life is now measured more accurately in months than in years. Reeling with the news, my friend said that life has suddenly understandably become urgent. "If I only have this much time, then what really matters? How shall I choose to spend it? Doing what? Where? With whom?" In our conversation, I said, "It feels as though everything is changing." At first my friend said, "yes, it does." But then said, "no. No; many things are changing but not everything. I have my friends, my community; I have my memories and my history; whatever happens, these will not change. I know that these things are sure."

The other friend with whom I spoke still has his job, but his employer is the City of Philadelphia. As you know, the mayor is forced to consider reductions of 10%, 20% or 30% in all sectors. For my friend, this situation is wreaking havoc. My friend struggles with anxiety. From past experience and the threat of feeling overwhelmed, he has learned that it helps to devise systems to cope with life. He likes to identify clear markers, goals, reliable guide posts for his life; something to aim for, like stakes in the ground charting a course. Reflecting later on our conversation, I imagined the gates of a slalom course for skiers, red and blue poles marking the way down an otherwise opaque and indistinguishable path. But my friend said that with his job in jeopardy, it feels as if the poles have been removed. So the immediate task is to identify some other guideposts; internal guideposts perhaps, discerned or created from a place within that is not subject to the whims of city government or the market economy.

These are anxious times we live in – not for just a few, but for many of us. It is of vital importance, therefore, that we come to trust that we are not alone, and that come what may, all shall be well.

At least once in our lives, if not with some frequency, we find ourselves in a dark night. We are threatened by the voices that announce, "you will not succeed; you will fall; it is finished." Yet in that darkness, another voice may rise up: "I do choose. I remember where I come from, who I am. All shall be well. I am not alone this day." For to you the gift of grace is offered.