

Proper 9C, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Kings 5:1-27; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-20

July 4, 2010

Season of summer travel in full swing.

As we set off on our travels, whether to old familiar spots or new unknown ones, besides our luggage, heavy or light, we carry much more:

memories laid down over years; joys and disappointments; expectations, hopes, dreams for this year's outing.

As always, also will bring much back with us, tangible and intangible:

Seashells and driftwood.

Rocks, boxes and boxes of them, mica from the old quarry up the road in Maine. Distinctive rocks from westernmost Scotland (Iona) and easternmost Canada (Cape Breton)—that *match*. These two lands, two continents, once were one!

Photographs and postcards

More memories, of course.

All we bring home reminds us of our connection with our special places.

Stepping into stories of travel this morning: With Naaman, for one. He is going back to Samaria (N. Kingdom of Israel) from his home in Aram (roughly Syria). These close neighbors were and are often at odds, if not actually at war.

Naaman is familiar with the land of Israel. Commands his king's army. Has made many incursions into this neighboring territory.

Carried with him things tangible and intangible: arms, armor, horses, men, provisions. Also expectations: to plunder, seize captives, maybe even territory.

Returned home with things tangible and intangible, too:

Victory for Aram, and all the honor, pride, standing with his king that go with victory.

At least one captive we know of, the young girl who now serves his wife.

Surely returned also with the images of war that soldiers, even commanders, carry for a lifetime: noise of battle still ringing in mind and heart; recurring fear and dread; indelible memories of the suffering, the dying, the dead.

Such things will change a person, even the most victorious, decorated commander. Some are hardened, perhaps, beyond reach; some go on struggling, however silently and privately, for meaning.

Naaman comes now on a different mission. Not as a raider; but not quite a supplicant, either. Comes still in full gear, and fully clothed in arrogance. He comes loaded down with lavish gifts. Idea is to buy his healing, not to leave owing the enemy anything.

But something other than human position and power is at work; hidden, invisible. Israel's king knows; and knows he doesn't have it. What Naaman seeks is beyond the king, bigger than anything he can command.

What it *is* known, though, to the "little" people:

Known by the young captive Israelite maid in Naaman's household. "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him"

Known, or at least suspected, by Naaman's own home grown servants, who urge him to go ahead and "Wash and be clean" as the prophet commanded. What does he have to lose?

Known, perhaps, even to Naaman himself, behind all his pride and bluster. He may know without knowing that his deep need for healing can be fulfilled in just this strange, unaccustomed act of humility.

Missing verses

Indeed, Naaman is healed, his flesh is restored. But that is only half the story. (O, the Lectionary! God bless the Lectionary Loppers) The real story just begins with the miracle, where the assigned reading ends.

Naaman, and all his company, go back to Elisha the man of God. This time, Elisha comes out to him. In full view and earshot of his own countrymen, Naaman declares: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (5:15)

Naaman offers and then urges Elisha to accept a present. Elisha, of course, refuses: Naaman's healing is from God alone.

His present refused, Naaman asks a gift for himself: "Let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant." So he will go home with fresh new skin, a new understanding of the reality of God, and a pile of dirt. Why?

Some commentators say that, though he recognizes the God of Israel as God of all the earth, Naaman still thinks of all gods as local. So he needs this bit of Israel's territory if he is to worship Israel's God.

That makes some sense.

Or, could the earth simply be a reminder for Naaman of his new spiritual home? Could it become a garden from which new fruit and fruitfulness will spring up?

This going home won't be easy. Naaman, the old ravaging and ravening wolf, is going back to the old wolf pack. But he is a changed animal, and to some extent his own land will be alien to him, and he to it. He will want for some solid ground to stand on, a way to stay connected with a newly encountered and recognized reality, while he works out how to go on serving his own king and country.

What compromises will he have to make? What will he do if the king calls for another raid? Will Naaman stand his ground? Will he flee, go underground? Will he be devoured? Will any of his company, who witnessed all this, be moved to join him in his new understanding?

The future is wide open, unknown.

In Luke, Jesus, is sending out 70 from among his growing group of followers, to proclaim God's new, unfolding reality, revealed in Jesus himself. Revealed also in the actions, words and very being of those he sends out ahead of him, on his way to Jerusalem.

They set out empty-handed: no money or provisions, no protection, not even a change of clothes.

"I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves," he tells them.

We know what wolves will do to lambs. But what might lambs do in the midst of wolves?

Share a new, far broader, deeper reality than ravening and rending.

Offer them a taste of God's reality of peace; a common humanity, common understanding

that crosses boundaries of custom, race, nationality;

that crosses boundaries as striking even as those between wolves and lambs.

Bring them healing of body and spirit.

Sing with them the vision of the prophet Isaiah: "The wolf shall live with the lamb" (11:6.; "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together," (65:25) [and not on each other].

Give them words to name what they have seen, received and shared: "The kingdom of God has come near."

The 70 return with hands as empty as when they set out. Nothing tangible to show from their travels. But brimming over with joy at their successes. "Even the demons submit to us." The fall of evil—the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God and God's reality—has begun.

Do not rejoice at this, though, but that your names are written in heaven. Not a narrow sectarian smugness that we are “in” and those not like us, not of us, are out.

A rejoicing in the growing, widening spread of God’s reality. Thanksgiving for moments of hospitality offered and received; healing of suspicions and divisions; borders and boundaries that have excluded too many, melting away in the presence, God’s kingdom come near in Jesus.

“Eat and drink whatever is set before you,” he instructs the 70. They are passing through Samaria now, where customs were different. Dietary laws not necessarily observed; food could be “unclean”. By eating and drinking with any who welcome them, they cross boundaries, break down barriers in themselves, and make more visible, bring still nearer the new reality they proclaim.

Here in this place, whether we have come to visit or come week by week, we come bringing many things tangible and intangible:

our offerings, the fruits of our daily lives; a desire for God and the strength and fellowship of community.

Our need to be renewed, centered, grounded, to have our lives with God, family, work and neighbors sustained.

Our need for healing in body and spirit.

Our hunger for spiritual food.

On this day, we give thanks for this nation, for its beauty and diversity, for our freedoms, for all who have made our common life possible and served the common good, and inspired us to do the same.

Later today many of us will celebrate this Independence Day at with barbecues, sharing the familiar food of our family traditions, ordinary “American” food: hamburgers, hot dogs, barbecued chicken.

Here in this place, the food set before us is also ordinary, common food: bread and wine. It is shared across borders and boundaries of time, geography, race, gender, status.

It is the food of Love, who bids us come and eat. It is his offering of himself, who is the Lamb of God.

We will go forth fed and renewed, connected by word, song, and the food of Love.

Like the 70 and millions since, we, too, will offer ourselves as messengers of God’s reality, known to us in the particularities of our own experience.

Open to see and come to know that reality in new and unexpected ways, wherever we may travel, in whomever we may meet.

Like lambs among wolves, signs of God’s own peace, which passes all understanding.