

Draw us all to You, Lord Jesus, for as You went about doing good to all especially those who suffered in this life, so teach us Your disciples today to show mercy upon those who need help in their various afflictions. Accompany all such acts of compassion by Your Church with the words of life, so that even if those who here must continue to suffer with physical ailments they may be called to serve You in the body of their humiliation, that thereafter they may wear the body of Your glory. Amen.

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "Would that 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, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel." And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel. "So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy." And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. 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?" So he turned and went away in a rage. But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel."

In Christ Jesus, who comes through the Word of God healing our every wound and disease of body AND soul, dear fellow redeemed:

Perhaps we think it was only in Biblical times that God's Word had power. In creation He spoke and it was so. At God's command Moses spoke and water gushed from the rock. Jesus told the demons to depart and they left. As the Centurion suggested, Jesus could speak the word and his servant would be healed. Jesus spoke and it was done. In our Gospel for today, Jesus said to the deaf mute – Ephatha! (Be opened!) and he could hear and speak.

But this same Word of God is living and active among you still today bespeaking forgiveness, righteousness and life upon you. Let us draw some significant parallels between the gracious washing described in our text and the gracious water being used for us today and conclude: **Without the Word of God the Water Is Simply Water.**

I

Hearing Elisha, the prophet in Israel, could cure Naaman of his leprosy, this Gentile general traveled to Israel seeking healing. First, Elisha does not even approach Naaman himself, but sends a servant to instruct him to wash seven times in the Jordan river. Here is how he responded: "Naaman was angry and went away, saying, 'Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. 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?' So he turned and went away in a rage."

Perhaps you have gone to a doctor with symptoms that kept persisting after your home remedies failed. You rather preferred your self-diagnosis even prognosis. Then you finally conceded to the treatment that was prescribed by the doctor, maybe it even required surgery, and it worked! If so you can identify with Naaman's pride. But he was approaching God, not a human doctor, and he dismissed the treatment. He thought the prophet should be able simply to wave his hand over his leprous spots and he would be healed.

But what he was told was just as simple, if you will. It required bathing seven times in the river Jordan. Naaman's servants convinced him of the simplistic nature of following the prophet of God's word to him. They said: "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God." The command was simple – *"Wash"* and the promise was great *"be clean!"* To be offended appeared to be so very out of line to these servants who were accustomed to obeying simple commands. They did them with little to no rewards given back to them.

Naaman was rather accustomed to the one giving the orders regardless of risk or reward. In his arrogance, he no doubt felt this was beneath him and so despised what seemed to be an inglorious event. To return to his home country surrounded by his many supporters and emerge from the waters there cleansed would seem to be of greater value. But, nevertheless, he was convinced and we read the blessed result: “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”

II

Without the command and promise from God through His prophet the waters of the Jordan would have been simple impotent water like the waters in Syria having no power to heal leprosy. But with the Word of God the water of the Jordan was not simple water. Sound familiar? It should. Listen to Luther’s answer to the Catechism question: *“How can water do such great things?” It is not the water that does these things, but the Word of God, which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simply water, and no baptism; but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit.* The Word of God is the power in your baptism, my fellow washed and cleansed children of God.

The group of people who brought the deaf mute to Jesus, prescribed how Jesus should heal him. We are told: “they begged Him to lay His hand on him.” But while Jesus touched the inside of the man’s ears and touched his tongue, it was with a word – “Ephatha!” that brought about the miracle. With that word spoken by the Lord, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosed and he could speak plainly, no need for speech therapy. So the word and promise of God to Naaman brought healing to him. He responded by declaring: “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.” Beyond the physical miracle, this healed leper received the regeneration of the Spirit just as you and I have in our baptisms.

So you see, what was so amazing in the days of Elisha and Naaman, is no less amazing today. It is true many of your neighbors, even neighbors who would identify themselves as Christian do not recognize the great work of God when His word is added to the element of water in holy baptism. Remember this passage from Ephesians? Listen to it carefully: “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her that He might sanctify her, having **cleansed her by the washing of water with the word**, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

What other god in all the world offers to do this for his or her people? Not a one! Only Israel, the Church of Christ Jesus our Lord, takes simple water and makes it into a gracious water of life for His people. He does this for all nations, just like Naaman came from a Gentile land in the days of Elisha, so our Lord sends out His Church to all nations making disciples by baptizing them.

Perhaps people in Syria heard of this healing and brought their leprous relatives to the Jordan, but without the word and command of God they would not have been healed. It is similar when people today pay to have water from the Jordan sent to be used in their baptisms. It remains simple water without the Word and command of God. You know how it works with water – water from the Jordan used in John's baptisms could very well be in the Puget Sound today!

Rejoice that God still works among us mightily with His Word. It is there in baptism as we have taken note, but also in the Sacrament of the Altar and in its proclamation both from the pulpit in sermons and from the altar in absolution. Also it is active among us in devotions and personal Bible readings. Pity those who think the Word is merely a cognitive exercise on our part. Faith, saving faith, comes by hearing the Word of God. The Gospel message of our salvation in Christ remains the power of God unto salvation. Through the Word, the Spirit brings to us Christ and the blessings He secured for us on the cross – forgiveness, life and salvation. Naaman and the deaf mute, have nothing on you. You are cleansed and healed, made holy in Christ Jesus, through the Word spoken upon you with the water applied. Amen.