

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 9, Year C

First Reading

2 Kings 5:1–14 (track one)

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. (ESV)

Isaiah 66:10–14 (track two)

"Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;

rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her;
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious abundance.”

For thus says the LORD:

“Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip,
and bounced upon her knees.
As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.
You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;
your bones shall flourish like the grass;
and the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants,
and he shall show his indignation against his enemies. (ESV)

Second Reading

Galatians 6:1–16

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in

order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 10:1–20

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’

I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.

“The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of

the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (2 Kings, track one)

When I first wrote about this story of Naaman and Elisha, I was focused, perhaps too much, on the cure and its simplicity. Now that I’ve studied this narrative more closely, there are many things about it I missed first time around.

The first thing to mention is that the text we have as part of the lectionary isn’t the whole story. It misses Naaman’s response to his healing, which seems like the real point of the story, and it overlooks the actions of Gehazi, Elisha’s faithless servant, which set both Elisha’s and Naaman’s actions in sharp contrast.

The change in Naaman’s attitude from the opening of the story to its conclusion is stark. He is a great man, a “man of substance” at the beginning. The narrator goes to considerable lengths to describe his fame and the reasons for it. The writer contrasts his renown with the person who leads him to his healing, a lowly servant girl. The king who sends Naaman to Samaria assumes that the prophet of whom he has heard is somehow beholden to the king of Samaria, for in his letter he doesn’t even mention the prophet, just asks the king to heal his military leader.

When finally Naaman finds his way to Elishah, the prophet refuses to see him, dealing with him only through a messenger, an intermediary. Elisha does not acknowledge the elevated position of Naaman, but he does send instructions on how he must be cured. Naaman, the elevated general of Syria’s armies, is offended. He had expected to receive his healing “at the prophet’s hand.” He goes on to disparage the waters of Israel, of the Jordan.

When his servants talk him into trying what was instructed, and when he is healed, having “flesh like a young boy” (a link to the young girl servant whose word set all this in motion), Naaman returns to Elisha, his heart changed as thoroughly as his skin. He comes without pomp or retinue, he offers a gift (which Elisha declines to accept) and declares his devotion to Yahweh, asking forgiveness in advance for pretending to worship his master’s God, which Elisha grants. It’s really regrettable that we don’t get to hear this part of the story in church on Sunday.

The tale goes on to speak of Gehazi, who goes off after Naaman to try to claim some of the “gift” that Elisha had refused. Naaman treats him with deference (getting down out of his chariot to speak to him) and gives him this gift. Gehazi’s behavior serves as a foil to that of Naaman, the faithless Israelite against the faithful foreigner and proselyte. Elisha’s response is to curse him with the same disease from which Naaman had been delivered.

It is unfortunate that our Sunday lection truncates all of this, as it turns a story of redemption into something else entirely.

(Isaiah, track two)

Here, in the very last chapter of the Book of Isaiah, we find these final words of consolation. Taken out of context as they are in our lectionary, they nonetheless convey some interesting tidbits. Try as I might to find some scholarly opinion to act as our springboard, nothing worthy of note sprang forth, so you’ll have to make do with my own insights here.

Before considering our verses for this week, though, I really do think that some context will be useful. In the opening verses of the chapter we hear God speak harshly of those who claim to seek God, but who in fact defile God by the way they treat their faithful kindred, the ones who are “humble and contrite in spirit, and tremble at God’s word.”

Isaiah 66:3–4

“He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man;
he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck;
he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig’s blood;
he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses
an idol.

These have chosen their own ways,
and their soul delights in their abominations;
I also will choose harsh treatment for them
and bring their fears upon them,
because when I called, no one answered,
when I spoke, they did not listen;
but they did what was evil in my eyes
and chose that in which I did not delight.”

God then goes on to promise “recompense” for those who have cast out the humble. There will be an “uproar” from the temple.

Now, this is interesting to me, for it is the only mention of the Temple at all in the last section of Isaiah, often called Third-, or Trito-Isaiah. You'll recall that this last section is given for the people of Israel, recently returned from Babylon, faced with the utter ruin to which they have come back. There is no Temple, but this passage assumes its reconstruction.

Or does it?

While the Temple will indeed be rebuilt, is this the temple Isaiah refers to? I'm not sure. Given the mention of a "new heavens and a new earth" mentioned in chapter 65 and echoed in verse 22 of our current chapter, I am led to wonder if this temple is not one foreseen by the prophet as the Temple of the "new earth." Yes, the people will construct a temple for themselves, one promised earlier in Isaiah (chapter 45), but perhaps that is only a pale reflection of the one that Isaiah actually sees here.

The other bit that I'd like to draw your attention to is the image of the mother. It is not insignificant, especially in the current day in which we find so many hyper-masculinized versions of Christianity (I shudder to call them Christian at all) that God here speaks for Himself as a mother.

"But!" some will say, "But no, God speaks of the people nursing at the breast of a restored Jerusalem! Jerusalem is the maternal figure!" While the image begins this way, God gently shifts us from this first image to a new one:

As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. (v. 13)

In the midst of verses that declare God's recompense for those who cast out the humble and vengeance on those who have oppressed Their people (vv. 15 and 16),

"For behold, the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to render his anger in fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire.
For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment,
and by his sword, with all flesh;
and those slain by the LORD shall be many. (ESV)

God has nestled this maternal gem.

It is no longer the city that is a mother to God's people. God Themselves shall serve in this capacity. Perhaps in this moment, it is more accurate to say, "God Herself." For God is all these things, avenging warrior, comforting mother, Wisdom, Power, so no single pronoun can encompass God.

In recent months, when I have found myself unable to avoid a personal pronoun for God, I have chosen "They/Them." This isn't to be politically correct, but to try to convey the way that God transcends gender while encompassing all genders. It's awkward. And at times as we work our way through the Lectionary cycle a second time you'll encounter places where I've failed to edit out the traditional He/His. This was and remains my default language for God, partly because I'm old, but partly because when I most needed God, I needed a "Father" and God came to me as such.

But I know that my own experience of God doesn't "define" God, and I am trying to get my language to reflect the reality that our text from Isaiah offers to us this week. I pray your understanding as I struggle along.

Second Reading

As we dive into Paul's closing words to the Galatians, I urge you to keep in mind that Paul is not focused on some future redemption. His mind is on the present and the Life with a capital "L" that is available to his readers in the present. Yes, there is the use of future tense in these sentences, but it is an immediate future, not some reward or punishment to be garnered in the after-life. Not that Paul doesn't believe in an afterlife, but getting people into heaven isn't his concern. Getting heaven into people now is. That is what he means by "... the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."

We have been conditioned by centuries of horrid theology to think that "eternal life" means living forever with Jesus in heaven after we die. IT DOES NOT. It means living the "life of the ages" (a more literal translation of the Greek) right now. It means stepping into the life that will WILL have forever, but NOW.

So now all of Paul's warnings aren't warnings about eternal damnation, but about the real-life consequences of "sowing to the flesh." "God is not mocked," he says. Interesting word, "mocked." It means to turn up one's nose at someone, to "get a nosebleed," even. What Paul appears to be saying then is that while it may *appear* that someone is reaping something desirable by "sowing to the flesh," what they reap, in the here and now, is corruption. It may look pretty, but it stinks if you get close enough.

I'm not sure, but I think that if I were preaching this week, I might find a link between "sowing to the Spirit" and the simple obedience and trust that Naaman finally demonstrated.

Before I depart this reading I'd like to commend to you a book by Mark Nanos, "The Irony of Galatians." In it he explains that the people who have come to Galatia trying to talk the members of that congregation into being circumcised are not, as many scholars have surmised, Jewish Christians who are demanding Jewish practices in order to be "truly Christian," but rather Jewish proselytizers who were instead speaking to Gentile Christians insisting that they become truly Jewish, including circumcision.

These proselytizers were at risk of being "persecuted for the Cross of Christ." That is, they were under pressure from the Jewish establishment of being punished for failure to convert Christians to Judaism. This is in fact the only explanation that makes sense of the phrase "persecuted for the Cross of Christ." No Jewish Christian would be persecuted for such.

It's a very long book on Galatians, and I've oversimplified Nanos' terribly, I'm sure. And I read the book more than 20 years ago, but it changes almost everything about how you read the whole letter. Again, I commend the book to you. If you really want to get a handle on Paul, Nanos' books on Galatians and Romans (The Mystery of Romans) are indispensable.

On to the

Gospel Text

Before I get into the text that you **will** read/hear on Sunday I'd like to deal briefly with that bit in italics that the choosers of our lectionary readings left out.

It's easy to see why they left these verses out. They're not easy to hear. They're the sort of hard thing Jesus says that make us cringe. Largely because they've been misappropriated, misused by preachers to scare us for ages.

I remind you what I said about Jesus and hard sayings last week. When we read them it is imperative that we hear Jesus' love and compassion for those about whom He speaks in His voice. He isn't condemning. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved. He isn't condemning, but He's

speaking a hard truth, and one that causes Him great sorrow because of the pain He knows it involves.

But that doesn't mean He intends that we read those words as if they mean Chorazin and Bethsaida are going to some eternal damnation about which Jesus intends to do nothing. He, like Paul, sees the corruption and death to which these cities sow. And He knows they will reap the same. And Capernaum, that city that exalts itself, it too shall fall into the pit of death, of Hades.

But coming to the time of judgment and confronting all the corruption you've wrought, all the death you've purveyed, all the salvation on which you turned your back, as bad as that is (worse than what Sodom has to look forward to. Perhaps because they didn't turn their backs on Jesus?), confronting all that at the foot of the Judgment Seat doesn't mean eternal damnation, it means facing your failures in a way that I don't look forward to, but still finding that mercy triumphs over judgment. And of course, seeing the enormity of that truth fully will make all the times I have failed to be merciful all the more painful. For a time. For a moment or a season. But not forever.

Capernaum may descend to Hades, but the gates of Hades cannot stand against the church that Jesus founded upon Peter, upon the Rock.

So, maybe let's not leave those verses out, but instead hear the heartbreak of God for the pain we so often choose for ourselves.

Okay, on to the seventy-two.

There are a couple of things I could go on about here, but I want to focus on the one that you're not likely to hear preaching from an Episcopal pulpit on Sunday.

Jesus tells his disciples to go into a town, and once they've found a "son of peace" under whose roof they will stay, to do things in this order.

First - Heal the Sick.

Second - Proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom.

While we can split hairs about what it means to "heal the sick" in our present day, the reality is that when Jesus sent them out, He meant that quite literally. Go into a village and heal the sick. Then tell the people that this is what the Kingdom of God looks like, that they have experienced the Kingdom. In the here and now. Present tense.

Jesus instructed those who follow Him to do healing. And to do it as a sign of the presence of the Kingdom. It is frighteningly simple. “Go out and do what you’ve seen Me do. Then tell them why it happened.”

But we don’t. And we wonder why our message fails to gain traction.

Pardon me for running on about this, but I want to tell you about someone named Heidi Baker. She’s one of my heroes of the faith. Maybe my greatest hero.

Heidi and her husband went to Mozambique as missionaries without two nickels to rub together. They had chosen to do what Jesus instructed, and trust that God would make a way for them to do what they knew themselves called to do. They endured enormous resistance and persecution. Contracts on their lives have even put out (though that’s well in the past now).

But in obedience to God, Heidi took in every orphan who crossed her path. Tens of thousands of them by now. She formed schools for them whose performance surpassed those of the publicly funded schools.

But she also founded churches in largely pagan portions of Mozambique. More than ten thousand last time I read a number, and that was years ago. Her network of churches was so powerful that when Mozambique face famine in the wake of horrendous flooding, the government turned to her to help distribute food to the “bush bush.”

How did she start these churches?

She went into a village upriver somewhere that had never heard of Jesus, never seen a white woman before. She endured the initial rejection (often stirred by the local witch doctor) and then asked for them to bring her someone deaf. She would pray for that person and see them healed. (Heidi has always had a special gift for healing deafness.) Then, and only then, would she tell them about Jesus, the source of that healing. And then she would invite the villagers to put their trust in Him.

And here we are, thousands and thousands of churches later.

Healing is real.

Yes, there are charlatans out there.

Yes, there are those who heal who forget Jesus’ words, “don’t rejoice in that, rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

But it doesn't change the truth that healing is still real. I've seen it. I've been a part of it. I've been a recipient of it. I could give testimony here to the people I've seen healed, but I don't want to go on too much.

The point is, we have a tool for bringing people face to face with the Goodness of God and we don't use it. Yes, it's been abused. Yes, it's been ridiculed. But it's real, and it's available to plain ol' you and me.

This isn't as easy as going down to the Jordan and dipping ourselves seven times. It's a lot scarier for most of us to trust this and do it. It isn't as easy, but it's still as simple. It's a matter of trust. And simple obedience. I'm betting those seventy-two were no less terrified than I was the first time my teachers sent me out onto the street to look for someone to heal. But they went. And they were probably as changed by what they saw happen under their hands as were the ones who were healed.

We can be healed. We can heal. We can be changed.