

Sermon for Sunday, July 7, 2013 2 Kings 5:1-14 "Prophetic Schtick"

We rarely think of the Word of God as a comedy routine, but I suspect comedy writers in Hollywood might recognize some of their own favorite storylines in our Old Testament reading today.

Let's start by setting the stage. Elijah is long since gone to heaven on that fiery chariot and Elisha is now the designated prophet. He is hanging out in Israel, doing his thing.

Meanwhile, there's trouble over the border in Aram. There's a general there, Naaman by name – Naaman /name – get it? – and Naaman is not a happy man, much like the unhappy bosses that have populated all sorts of tv sitcoms from the days of Mr Burns on "The Simpsons" to Jack Donaghy on "30 Rock." He is all hot and bothered – a normal state for bosses if we look at television comedies – but in this case, he's got a good reason. He's got a skin disease. It's described in the passage as leprosy, but it's good to remember that in those days, just about any persistent rash was called leprosy. You'll note that there is no mention of losing fingers or toes or noses, one of the things that has happened to people with Hansen's disease until fairly recent medical advances.

But whether it's leprosy or a heat rash, this man is suffering. He's got a bad rash that is not clearing up, despite all the local Aramite doctors' efforts. And we all know that a boss with a bad rash is a very cranky boss. And if that boss is a general with a sword and an army, that's definitely not a good thing.

Now there is always a long-suffering wife in these situations in TV land – think Alice Kramden, Clair Huxtable, Edith Bunker – and this story is no different. Naaman's wife – we never get her name – has to put up with this General Crankypants and is sighing about it to her maid, who just happens to be someone Naaman captured on one of his raids into Israel. Might she be something like Rosario in "Will and Grace" or Berta on "Two and a Half Men," who are both infinitely smarter and more cunning than their employers? Anyway, this maid says, "I happen to know someone who can help the General."

Wife perks up. "You do? Well, tell us who it is. If I have to put up with another day of Naaman grumping around this oasis, I'm going to take the sword to him myself."

"He's in Samaria, my lady."

Okay, that's a problem. It means that the healer (whom we already know will probably be Elisha) is going to be an Israelite. And the Israelites and the Arameans are sworn enemies. It's like Archie Bunker going to George Jefferson for some help.

And when his wife tells Naaman about this, he's in a quandary. He wants to be healed, but going hat in hand to those stupid little Israelites? Naaah. But maybe...

He comes up with a plan. Just like mean old bosses in the situation comedies, he gets someone else to do his work for him. In this case, it's actually HIS boss, the king of the Arameans. The king of the Israelites is now subservient to him, since Aram conquered Israel. He's got to do whatever the king asks for. So the king of the Arameans sends the king of the Israelites a letter, saying "I need you to do something for me. You remember Naaman, don't you? Big general? Conquered you? Yeah. That guy. He's got a little problem and I want you to take care of it. Little skin disorder. I've heard you people are good at that sort of thing. I'm sending you some money and some fine clothing as a sign of respect. Get it done."

And now the king of the Israelites responds and he sounds like no one so much as Mel Brooks. "Oy vey iz mir! Look at this letter! That crazy king of the Arameans wants me to cure his general, that nasty Naaman. Who does he think I am? God?"

But somehow Elisha hears about it, responding as if he's playing a dapper Fonz to the king's eternally exasperated Mr. Cunningham. "Hey, king, king, don't sweat it! I've got it covered. Send him to me."

Sounds like the king's problem is solved, right? Sounds like Naaman's problem is solved, too, right?

But we're in sitcom land, so nothing is ever resolved that easily.

Naaman shows up at the door of Elisha's house. He's standing out there in his chariot, tapping his foot. He's expecting this measly little prophet of a defeated nation to come crawling out to say "what can I do for you, general?"

But Elisha doesn't come out. He sends out a servant with a message. "Go wash yourself in the Jordan seven times."

If Naaman was named Archie Bunker, he would have exploded with a loud "Meathead!" He says "I come all this way and this...this...this IMBECILE doesn't even come out to greet me, then he gives me this stupid prescription about washing in the river. I could have stayed home and dunked myself in the river back home. Our rivers are better than Israel's rivers!" He's in high dudgeon.

But his little aide-de-camp – think Radar O'Reilly on MASH – says "well, sir, you've come all this way. It couldn't hurt to give it a try."

So, grumbling all the way, he goes down to the river Jordan, bathes himself in it seven times, and his disease is healed. His skin is, according to the passage, as smooth and fresh as a baby's.

Now at this point, if this was truly a situation comedy, the clever Elisha would reveal that he had taken all the general's clothes or the keys to his chariot, just to keep the comedy going.

But in Scripture, unlike in comedy, the story simply ends there with the statement that something marvelous had happened to someone who most likely didn't seem to deserve it – an enemy general. And it happens without any real profession of faith on the part of Naaman. He never says "I believe in the God of Israel."

And still it happens. It is pure gift.

So does Naaman go back home and say to his wife, a la Ralph Kramden, "You're the best, Alice," since she passed along the word about the prophet? Does he say to the servant girl "You're pretty smart for an Israelite?"

We don't know. The story is not wrapped up in a 30 minute program format like on tv. What we do know, however, is that God has done something remarkable for someone who may not deserve it but is suffering. He has done it without regard for the longer-term results. God has healed him, through the prescription that Elisha gave Naaman.

There's good news for us in that. Not in the miraculous cure itself, as wonderful as it is. Not in the fact that it is done without any direct action by God's prophet, like the laying on of hands. No. The good news is that someone who was broken and unworthy was still the recipient of God's healing grace, simply because he was one of God's creatures and God loved him. That's the good news for us as well. God heals our broken hearts and bodies in ways we rarely realize, every day. Thank God for a creator who cherishes us so much that he fixes us even when he could just as easily dismiss us as too broken. Thank God for that kind of love and that kind of power. Thank God.

Amen.