

Weekly Reading – Monday, February 9, 2009

We're turning now to the lessons for Sunday, February 15, 2009, which falls on both the President's Day Weekend and Valentine's Day weekend. It's the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany in the liturgical year, with next Sunday, February 22, being the last Sunday in the season and Lent 2009 beginning on February 25.

II Kings 5: 1 - 14

One of the great stories of the Bible! Naaman, a high-powered Syrian general has just one little, or not so little problem. He has leprosy. On a raid into neighboring Israel he has brought back a young servant girl who tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, that there is prophet in Israel who can help Naaman out. One of the things to notice in this story is the role of the "little people," the nameless servants who time and again guide Naaman on the path toward healing and wholeness. So Naaman loads up a couple semi-trucks with wealth he anticipates needing to buy his cure. He first appears on the doorstep of Israel's king, who is terrified that he has been set up. There's a little subtext here about the relative power of kings and prophets. By this time in the unfolding story of ancient Israel the kings are pretty much losers. The hope of Israel lies with the prophets, in this case, Elisha. Elisha sends word for Naaman to pay him a visit, and again Naaman puts the whole caravan of wealth and power in motion. Arriving at Elisha's humble shack, Naaman receives a welcome that does nothing to flatter his big ego. Adding insult to injury, Elisha instructs Naaman to go "dip himself seven times in the Jordan." "That stinking ditch," explodes Naaman, "we have far better rivers in Syria." A servant intercedes. Naaman dips in the Jordan and is born anew. One might take "dipping in the Jordan" as a type of baptism into Christ. In order to be healed Naaman has to risk embarrassment, to surrender all the trappings of power and become "as a little child again." Sometimes for wealthy, sophisticated and connected folks today the gospel is an embarrassment. Being interested in Jesus, making a faith commitment, or even being "born anew," says, among other things, "I need help, and can't do this myself." "I need saving, I need a Savior." Didn't come easy for Naaman and doesn't come easy for some of us.

I Corinthians 9: 24 - 27

Speaking of people who thought they were in charge and for whom letting go and letting God didn't come easy, here's Paul! God had to knock this one off a horse and strike him blind before he could see! These four verses conclude a chapter in which Paul speaks of the nature of his apostolic ministry. If Paul was saved, and he was, by grace, then the shape and nature of his ministry and life is about his response to that grace. "An obligation has been laid upon me," wrote Paul in verses we had last week. Here Paul employs athletic images and language to talk about the life of faith and his life as an apostle. There is no "having arrived." Nor is there any "retirement." So long as Paul lives, he is seeking to answer to the grace of God which called him, claimed him, and healed him. So long as he lives, he runs this race. Doing so, says Paul, is a matter of considerable discipline, not unlike being a runner or a boxer. A key phrase is "self-control," a concept that has gone missing in contemporary western, consumer society. For decades now we've been into "if it feels good, do it," "let it all hang out," and "be free, express yourself, be yourself." One recalls Mark Twain's wry comment,

"There is no worse advice you can give a man than to 'Be yourself.'" Who knows, maybe with the economic troubles, self-control will make a come back. It's pretty much for sure that those who weather these storms will be helped to do by a higher level of self-control and self-management than is sometimes common these days and in this society.

Mark 1: 40 - 45

A sort of perplexing reading, this one. It's a brief, one-on-one encounter between Jesus and a man who had leprosy (hence the Old Testament story of Naaman). It comes at the conclusion of a busy first chapter and employs such typically Markan touches as "Immediately" (vs. 42) It precedes the story, back in Capernaum, of Jesus healing the paralyzed man who is let down through the roof by four friends. The main drama of the story has to do with Jesus' instructions to the healed man, which include follow up with the religious authorities and doing so by "the book," and a command from Jesus to this man that he say nothing about how he was made well or who did it. This is a first instance of what scholars often refer to as "the Messianic secret," the frequent command of Jesus to others to say nothing about him, to keep what they've seen to themselves. Some wag suggested that this may be the one and only command of Jesus that most folks do actually keep, "Say nothing about me to anyone!"

Jokes aside, it remains perplexing and I, at least, can only speculate about the reasons for the command to silence, as well as the fact that the command is never heeded. Why does Jesus say, time and again, "Tell no one," or "say nothing?" Perhaps because miracles, healings and exorcisms, are not the point, not really. They are signs of the in-breaking Kingdom of God and anticipations of a new creation, of the battle against Sin and Death. As such, the point is not miracles or believing in them. The point is what they point to, the power and presence of God. At this point in the Gospel, miracles are coming fast and furious. That will change. Jesus will begin to experience opposition, misunderstanding, abandonment and betrayal. If you were only along for the good stuff, Mark seems to be telling us, you don't really get it. There's a cross up ahead. And as the saying goes, "No cross, no crown."