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July 4, 2004  
2 Kings 5:1-14

### “Child’s Play”

On this hot and humid Sunday at the beginning of July, a great holiday in this nation, so many other things to do than be in church, the lectionary turns up a rather obscure passage of scripture buried deep in the dusty history of the Old Testaments book of Second Kings. We have the story of one of the Syrian army’s great warriors. The General Patten of Ancient Syria, by all accounts strong, tough, leathery, if you’ve seen Troy, think Brad Pitt, only wearing more clothing. His name is Naaman. He’s big, tough, and wealthy, and he has led Syria in victory after victory against its enemies, raiding their cities, plundering their stockpiles of resources and people. He’s sort of the like the modern day Los Angeles Lakers.

And so on this July 4<sup>th</sup> we have before us a figure engaged in a battle for independence and freedom. The battle Naaman is waging in the Bible this morning is not with the hated enemy Israelites, it is the battle God has always been engaged in, the battle to bring life out of death. For Naaman, the struggle centers in his own body, it has, as our bodies tend to do, turned on him. I remember a mid-50’s male friend of mine who said, “kid, do you sleep all the way through the night?” “Yes,” I answered. “Well, that’ll change.” No man has ever defeated Naaman, but his body is on the verge of defeat; Leprosy is now threatening to undo him. He longs for freedom from a disease that holds him captive; he wants independence from a sickness that in those days meant certain death. Naaman, it seems, is capable of anything except his own salvation.

Typical of the scripture story, the key, we discover, to the healing of the powerful, is in the person of one who has no power. In this case it’s a child. A little Israelite slave girl, the servant of Naaman’s wife, offers a suggestion to Naaman. She says in her land there is a prophet, a man of God named Elisha, and he will be able to cure Naaman of his leprosy. We aren’t told how far the leprosy has advanced, but we can be pretty sure that for Naaman to listen to this child, this nothing of an Israelite hostage, kept alive to wait on his wife, the leprosy must be winning the day.

Naaman is compelled to listen to her. He has no other choice. Staring death in the face does this to people like Naaman. Unwilling to give up, with what is left of his life oozing out of bleeding sores, Naaman listens to a child. It’s probably the first time in his life he has paid any attention to a young girl, especially an Isrealite slave girl. But perhaps when death’s carriage draws close, even the Naamans of the world will have a change of heart. And so Naaman listens to the voice of a child.

Her suggestion, it seems to Naaman, is rather foolish. His healing, his freedom, his very life, will not be found within the strong borders of his own country, but actually in the land of his enemy. The prophet Elisha this little girl speaks so highly of lives in Samaria.

This must have been like salt thrown on Naaman’s leprous body, not only was he taking directions from a child slave, her directions were going to make a fool of him, sending him on a scavenger hunt to a foreign land, lugging hard won Syrian gold and silver as gift payment to Israel’s prophet. And then, and then, when he finally arrives at the prophet’s shanty little front door, Elisha doesn’t even have the courtesy to come out, sending instead a servant, who knows,

perhaps another child, passing along the ridiculous healing regimen of washing himself seven times in the filthy little creek the Israelites call the Jordan river – when the mighty rivers of Damascus flow through his backyard. It is insulting and only after having his massive ego stroked by a few more servants does Naaman agree to go to the Jordan, lay down his sword and shield there by the riverside, and, much to his surprise, he is free. His flesh, as the story tells us, becomes like that of a little child.

His freedom, his independence, his life, all of this, because of a little child who became the mouthpiece of the Lord. Naaman is a minor character, the true actor, the one in which God brings about God's purposes, is the little girl. This is just like our God who himself ushered in our redemption, who granted our forgiveness, who won his victory, not through the weapons of the battlefield, but in the skin of a child. Martin Luther said that "God became small in Christ. He showed us his heart, so that our hearts might be won."

It is just like God who would use the voice of a child to disarm and heal a great and powerful general like Naaman.

I remember listening to NPR a couple of months ago when they were doing a series on the impact of Brown vs. the Board of Education in the fight for Civil Rights. The battle for Civil Rights changed when Martin Luther King suggested that children be put in the streets, on the front lines, and as the commentator said, those children became foot soldiers in the army of the Lord, freedom fighters, not because of their power and might, but because of their innocence. It was amazing how Southern policemen who so freely turned the dogs and hoses loose on adults had such a difficult time doing the same when children were leading the way to freedom. Children have the capacity to disarm the strong and mighty of the world.

I have often wondered when the world's most powerful men, and the powerful of the world are usually all men, get together to fight their wars and broker peace, if, when they gather around those important tables, if a baby, some child, should not be put in their midst, to crawl along the table-tops, to be passed from lap to lap, to be a constant distraction, and a constant reminder of what is really at stake. I can't help but think that if we really wanted peace between Israel and Palestine, or the US and Iraq, the mothers of children killed on all sides would be given the decision-making power – I bet they could broker peace.

During his 27 years as a political prisoner on Robben Island, while so many of his colleagues marched in the streets and halls of parliament for justice and equal rights in South Africa, Nelson Mandela said the thing he missed the most, that which he could hardly bare to live without, was the sound of children laughing and playing. Naaman discovered that the most powerful, the most healing, the most liberating thing in the world is the presence of a child, the voice of a child.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a couple who wanted to be good parents. This girl's parents sent her to church, hoping she'd pick up a good value or two, meet some nice friends, but they never came with her. They would pull up in the church's circular drive, the little girl would hop out of the car, and the parents would go out for Sunday breakfast.

The father was an upwardly mobile, ambitious executive for a chemical company. He and his wife lived flashy lives, filled with expensive cars, lavish trips, and wild parties. But, every Sunday, the little girl was there for Sunday School and church. One Sunday, Fred Craddock looked out over his congregation and thought, "There she is with a couple of adult friends." Later he realized she was there with her Mom and Dad. When, at the end of the service, the invitation was given, the parents came forward. They wanted to join the church.

“What prompted this?” Craddock asked them after the service. “Do you know about our parties?” they asked. I’ve heard many stories about your parties.

“Well, we had one last night. It got a bit loud, and little rough. There was a lot of drinking, too much drinking. And it woke up our daughter, and she came downstairs and stood on the third step from the bottom. When she saw all the food on the dining room table she said, ‘Oh, can I give the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Amen.’ Then she smiled, said goodnight, and she went back upstairs. The party-goers began to stammer, “Goodness, where did the time go . . .” “How did it get so late? “I suppose we ought to run along.” Within two minutes, the house was empty. Mom and Dad picked up crumpled napkins, spilled peanuts, half-sandwiches, and took the empty glasses on trays into the kitchen. And they looked at each other across the mess. The husband said what they were both thinking, “Where do we think we’re going?”

Children, they put things in perspective, they point out the flaws and hypocrisies in our lives, they don’t know any better than to speak the truth to us adults, they call us to account, and if we listen to them, as Naaman discovered, we might find our salvation.

A little over a week ago I was in my office here in the basement of the chapel. It was a typical weekday morning, I was hunkered down behind my desk feverishly working on very important things, like e-mail, making phone calls, strategizing marketing techniques, making sure my palm pilot was full enough to make me believe I was worthwhile busy, listing all the tasks that needed to be accomplished before evening.

When I looked up from my desk there was a little two-year old girl in the doorway. I recognized her at once though I hadn’t seen her in nearly a year. She was from my previous church. I had spent hours in the hospital by her parents, praying over this little girl who, at six months old, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. And now here she was, walking into my office, her parents trailing behind. While she and I batted my office beach ball back and forth across the floor – which I keep on a bookshelf for just such an occasion – I asked her parents how it was going. “Not good,” they said. The physicians at Duke hospital were providing remarkable care, but the tumor had spread to her spinal chord. Cancer was invading the spine of their little girl. I could tell by the way they looked at me, the prognosis was far worse than merely not good.

I remembered the words of Reynolds Price, who said, “all the care and cash in the world are a flimsy shield when cancer comes calling.” The little girl looked at me over the beach ball, “we’re going to see the ducks,” she said in the barely discernable language of a two year old. “Yes, we’re going to see the ducks, and the flowers in the garden,” her mom chimed in, recognizing my confusion, the confusion of one who rarely makes conversation with toddlers. We finished our visit and I watched my friends leave the office, a long clear tube, pumping life-giving chemicals into her tiny arteries banging the back of my little friend’s unsteady legs as they left.

I looked back at my desk and all that important work, my inbox had received 11 new messages in 25 minutes, my palm pilot was beeping, a new voice mail was waiting. All those weapons of work and life that we surround ourselves with to give us the illusion that we are in control, that we are important, that if we only work hard enough we can save our selves. I felt foolish. The charade had been stripped bare by a two year old. A young couple was taking their cancer ravaged little girl over to the gardens to see the ducks. And I thought I had important work to do.

I remember before the Shock and Awe campaign that rained down on Baghdad a year and a half ago, Donald Rumsfeld remarked that the combined might of the United States armed

services was the most powerful force to ever walk the face of the earth. But with responded to Mr. Rumsfeld, he was wrong. The most powerful force to ever come upon the face of the earth was a little child. When God saw that the world was spinning out of control, that his creation, humanity was about to be lost forever, God waged war on the rebellion by becoming small, by becoming weak, tender, by taking on the flesh of a little child.

One day Jesus was walking along and he called his disciples together, they had been bickering about the kinds of things you and I, us adults, usually bicker about, prestige, position, success, who was the most important, who was the greatest. They said, “tell us Jesus, tell us the answer to our questions.” And Jesus said, “you want answers, you want to know who is the greatest, you want to know how to get to heaven? Here, become like one of these,” and he took a little child, he put it in their midst, and said, “there, there’s your answer.” Amen.