28th Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Cycle C, 10.13.19  
2 Kings 5:1, 14-17; 2 Timothy 2:8-13;  
Luke 17:11-19

HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD?

“The word of God cannot be chained,” St Paul emphatically tells young Timothy in today’s epistle. Sometimes, however, the meaning of God’s Word is locked up tightly... unless we know something about the historical background and the cultural setting of the scripture passage. That’s the case today with our reading from the Book of Kings. We need to know more of the story. It begins with Naaman, commander of the army of a foreign king, a great man in high favor with his master. The narrator paints a very big picture. This is an important man – think: four-star general, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, decorated for military victories, in favor with the king, one of the inner circle. Naaman was somebody to reckon with. That’s how the narrator begins. We have to see that this man is powerful in every way; but then the story takes a turn. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now, the picture of Naaman shifts in our mind. All the greatness described at the start can't change this one terrible truth. A mighty warrior, but infected with a disease so dreaded that his skin seemed to be rotting on his bones. Then someone else enters the story -- very different from the mighty warrior. She is a slave, carried off during a raid into Israel. Mighty warriors were accustomed to such booty -- gold, silver, chariots, horses, and slaves. They could have what they wanted. This particular slave girl had been carried from her home and now served Naaman's wife. She is as small as Naaman is big. The power he has is the power she lacks. Yet, she isn’t silent. She blurts out to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy."

Now why did this young girl care about this man whose army had carried her away from her own people? And why did Naaman and the king listen to what this slave girl said? The text doesn't tell us those things -- only that the king gave Naaman permission to go. So Naaman departs with lots of gifts and a letter of introduction from his king. But when the king of Israel reads the letter, he's distressed about the whole matter until the prophet Elisha intervenes and tells the Israeli king to send Naaman to him. The mighty warrior and his chariots and horses and gifts of gold and silver head to Elisha's house.

Now, this is a great scene! Elisha doesn't even come out of his house! He sends his servant out with a message for Naaman. "Go, wash seven times in the Jordan and you'll be clean." Well, Naaman isn't used to this. He's a man with authority. He's accustomed to speaking with kings. Who does this Elisha think he is? Naaman has no intention of washing in the muddy Jordan. Sarcastically, he says: "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" If Israel's prophet is going to dishonor Naaman by not even coming out to meet him, then Naaman is going to insult Israel's river. With that outburst, the mighty warrior turns toward home. And that would have been the end of it. Except for the servants…. They push Naaman to do what the prophet says. He had done many difficult things before.
He was, after all, a mighty warrior. So he's surely brave enough to wash in a muddy river. (And this is where today's passage begins.)

Naaman turned around, went down to the Jordan, and immersed himself seven times. When he came out of the water that last time, he looked at his hands and his feet. His flesh was like the flesh of a young boy and he was astounded. Through the prophet of the God of Israel healing had come to this great warrior and we hear his profound declaration: Now I know there is no God except the God of Israel.

Then the warrior, the mighty general, asks something strange of the prophet: Give me two mule-loads of earth. What’s that about? He will only worship the God of Israel, but he thinks he has to do it on Israel’s soil, so he wants to take some of that soil home with him. In the ancient times, the gods were associated with a particular place or country. The pagan gods were limited; they didn’t have power outside their own region, sort of like district managers. Namaan didn’t yet understand that the God of Israel, the Creator God whom we worship, is not limited to time or place, to one nation or one people. God is God – for all and forever. As we sang in our psalm today: The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.

How big is your God? I recall speaking with a young couple preparing for marriage. She was a baptized Catholic, committed to her faith, and he was a Hindu, although very familiar with the Catholic tradition and willing to support any children from their marriage in being raised as Catholic Christians. In the course of our conversation he asked a pointed question: “When we have children, what will they think of me since I’m not Catholic? Will they believe that I too am loved by God and saved as one of God’s own?” I was saddened to think that many people, perhaps some of us, are still adversely influenced by the notion of a small God. Some still adhere to the old Latin phrase: extra ecclesiam, nullus salve, which meant “outside the Church, no salvation.” That’s not what our scriptures would have us believe. That’s not what Pope Francis is teaching by his preaching, his writing and his interviews, as when he said: "The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists.

Salvation comes from the word for health and wholeness. The healing stories in today’s scriptures tell us that health and wholeness came to the outsiders, the foreigners – to Namaan the Syrian and, in the gospel, to the despised Samaritan who even returned to give thanks, although the Israelites who were healed didn’t. The God of Israel would not be confined, but extended salvation, wholeness to the least likely candidates.

You and I live in a very pluralistic world. It’s a challenge for us to maintain our faith and convictions when there is often little support for faith in our culture and society, in the media and even among family and friends. Whenever I feel discouraged or think that God is not very present in our world, or look at current statistics that a third of American adults under the age of thirty identify themselves as “nones” – people without any religious affiliation, I go back to the teaching of the Church – the renewal that she undertook over fifty years ago at the Second Vatican Council – the bold vision which Pope Francis wishes to
release from captivity. I take hope in the inspired words that reaffirmed the scriptures which show us how big and how great is our God.

In answering that pointed question: \textit{Who will be saved?} The bishops at the Vatican Council, in their document on “The Church,” gave this compelling response regarding those who aren’t Catholic or even Christian. They declared:

\textit{Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways. There is, first, that people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh – the Jewish people. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, our judge on the last day.}

\textit{Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all people life and breath and all things, and since the Savior wills all people to be saved. Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.}

\textit{Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by God who enlightens all people that they may at length have life.}

(Documents of the Second Vatican Council: Constitution on the Church, #16)

Now that’s a picture of a very big God and I hope it’s the expansive image of God that we, as a parish community and as individuals, can keep in our minds and hearts as we proudly live out our Catholic faith with love and devotion, while always respecting the many ways that God moves in the minds and hearts of all people, bringing salvation – health and wholeness -- to everyone.

\textit{John Kasper, OSFS}