



Carrying Holy Ground Into Unholy Places

TEXT
2 Kings 5:1–19

October 22, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I have come to hold tightly this story of Naaman because I know my own journey of faith is so often a compromise. So often there is more than a little distance between my life and the life of Jesus. You, no doubt, know what I mean.

His way with power and weakness is foreign to me. His way with ego and selflessness is foreign. His way with sacrifice and responsibility is foreign.

His way of discarding status and seeing the good in everyone and everything is foreign — foreign, and yet also magnetic. As much distance as there is between his life and my life, I am helplessly drawn to the life he lives, and I am confident that following him is my home.

Naaman was an Aramean or Syrian general, victorious in war, respected at home, the king's right-hand man, but he was imprisoned by leprosy. Through a twisting walk of providence, Naaman finds himself standing in the driveway of Israel's prophet, Elisha. Elisha doesn't speak to Naaman, but rather sends his butler to greet him. The prophet's junior tells the general, the prophet says to go wash in the Jordan seven times.

It's a strange remedy, and it makes Naaman angry. He has an ego. You know folks who lead with their egos. They are seldom fun to be around. Naaman says, *I thought for me the prophet would come out, and show some respect. I thought for me he would dance and sprinkle a little wuffle dust, wave his hand over the spot and say a shazam or two. After all, I am a general. And why the Jordan? We have better rivers in Damascus. Forget this. I'm going home.*

His assistant says, *Naaman, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult you would have done it. Why not do this?* So Naaman washes in the Jordan. The Jordan is not a grand river. It is not a rushing river. Michael's song says, *The Jordan River is deep and wide, meet my mother on the other side. Hallelujah!*

Well, it's not deep and wide, but the Jordan is always about the other side. The Jordan is a border place. The Jordan was the crossing place between the wilderness and the promised homeland. The Jordan was where the prophet Elijah ascended into heaven, and Elisha watched him as he crossed over. The Jordan was the place where Jesus, dripping with baptismal waters, watched the spirit descending upon him, crossing

over from the other side. The Jordan was always the crossing over point between where we are and life that can best be called home.

Naaman washed himself there seven times. And it says his illness was healed. Despite Naaman being an enemy of God's people, despite Naaman's arrogance, despite Naaman being a foreigner, he is healed. But more than healing, Naaman did some crossing over of his own. He met God at the Jordan. He met grace at the Jordan. He says, *Now I know there is only one God.* This gracious change also comes with challenge. He may be a new man, but he still has to go back home.

Naaman makes two requests — both of them odd. *Can I have some dirt? This is holy ground — and I want to remember the place where God came to me. Can I take some dirt?*

He takes two mule loads of holy ground. I don't know what he does with it. I don't know if he builds a special garden to worship, or if he sprinkles a little in his shoes every morning to remind him to walk in a new way. But he carries two mule loads of dirt back to Syria.

And then he asks this: *I will never again worship any God but the Lord, but may the Lord pardon your servant on*

one count? When my king goes into the house of Rimmon ... the sanctuary to worship the military God of Syria ... and as the king leans on my arm, and as I bow down in the house of Rimmon, may God pardon me for this one offense? Do you hear what he is saying? He is saying, my life is changed for I now know the living God. But I have a problem. I have to live in a place that does not serve God. It may no longer be my home, but it is where I live, and I'm going to have to make some compromises. Serving God in that place will leave me caught between duty and duty. Will you pardon me a necessary compromise?

We might expect the prophet to say, *Naaman, the commandments declare, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not worship any idols. You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone."*

But the prophet says none of that. The prophet says, "Go in peace."

It is the prayer we pray when we realize faith has launched us on a journey, and we live where we live, but it is not home anymore. This is a common theme in scripture. Abraham must leave home and go to a land God will reveal. Moses spends his whole life in the wilderness on his way home. The exiles pray for home. Jesus tells his followers, *Drop your nets and follow* — because none of us are home yet.

And there on the journey, we make compromises between where we are and where we will be; between who we are and who we will be.

I have told you before of the visit with Senator John Danforth when he was here at Village several years ago. He told us that he attended services on Ash Wednesday. You know that service; it includes imposition of ashes on one's forehead or hand. You remember that Danforth is not only a senator, but also an Episcopal priest. After the service, he returned to his car to go back to work. But first he took his handkerchief and cleaned his forehead. He said he felt like he was living in two different worlds: the world of his faith and the world of his work. And there was distance between the two. He was embarrassed to show the world that he had been to church. But as soon as he removed the ash, he was more troubled. He was troubled by his embarrassment of his faith.¹ He had a chance to take some dirt with him, but he left it behind.

I think that dirt is a metaphor for the journey that is launched by hope. A simple way to speak of the Christian faith is that the faith of Jesus means that we are defined more by who we will be than by who we have been. The church is defined more by who we will be than who we have been.

We are defined by hope. But hope doesn't easily fit in this world. Hope can seem unreasonable to the cynical. Hope can seem weak to the struggling. Hope can seem intrusive to the powerful. Hope can seem risky to the broken.

Like the Jordan itself, hope is the crossing over place between who we have been and who we

will be; between where we live and the place God calls home.

But we never cross over completely. We always live in compromise, caught between duty and duty.

Carol and I were touched by the presence of so many of you at our daughter Sarah's ordination last week. As we moved toward that service, I reflected on being a father, her father. One thing I know is that there were many moments of her life that I missed because I was at church. Pastors work a lot of weekends, you know. There are evening meetings as many nights as not. I missed some recitals and some performances along the way. I missed more than a few dinners. It might have been easy for her to resent the church, but she didn't. In you, she found grace and love and belonging. I am so grateful. I did the best I knew how, because I love my daughter. But as a father and as a pastor, loyal to duty and duty, I have made some necessary compromises.

Maybe some of you know what I'm talking about. What is true of me as a father is true of me as a Christian. Maybe you know about that too. We all compromise. The more common word for compromise is *hypocrisy*.

I remember the time I bumped into one of you at Waid's. Do you remember Waid's?

"Tom, have you met my friend Randy?"

"Hi, Randy."

"This is my pastor," my friend said.

Randy said, "Oh, really?"

"Yes, I am."

“I used to go to church,” Randy said.

“Is that right? You don’t go now?” I asked.

“No, I just can’t do it anymore. The church is full of hypocrites.” That’s what he said.

“It may seem that way at 9:30, but come at 8:00. We have plenty of room for more.”

We are all hypocrites. But there is a good kind and a bad kind of hypocrite. The bad kind is easy enough to understand. It’s folks whose lives and professed beliefs have no integrity with each other.

My mother-in-law made her delicious chocolate cake, and my father-in-law, sitting in his recliner, would say, “Darlin’, I’d give an arm and a leg for a piece of that cake.” She cut him a piece about as big as his leg.

Now he was a hypocrite. Oh, he loved the cake, but he’s not giving an arm and a leg; he won’t even get up out of his La-Z-Boy to cut a piece. We know that kind of hypocrisy — where professed beliefs and actions have no integrity.

But there is a good kind of hypocrisy, I think. That is the kind that refuses to reduce the hope we have in Jesus Christ to fit our daily choices. It is the unavoidable compromise that results when we refuse to reduce our hope to the status quo. We profess that Jesus calls us to go the second mile; to love the enemy until the enemy becomes our friend; to forgive not because everything has been made right, but because so much can’t be made right, and we still choose love anyway.

That is our home, and we are not there yet. But our hope has launched us on the journey, and every day we pray for pardon for necessary compromise. For our lives are a mixture of faith and failure, of fidelity and fear. But there is dirt from a holy kingdom that has been sprinkled in our shoes, and we are learning to walk toward home.

That is our journey as a church. It is why we minister to children — in these back hallways and in the schools downtown.

It is why we show up in hospital rooms and funeral homes.

It is why we collect food to give away, and why we partner with friends in faraway places like La Romana and Haiti and Thwake.

It is why we partner with folks not so far away, down on Antioch.

It is why we care about immigrants and victims of gun violence; about the sick and the systems that bring them care.

It is why we battle the racism that is within us and the injustice that is in our land.

We are not home yet, but in Jesus Christ we have seen it, and we are living toward the day when we cross over to that promised day.

As people of faith, we trust that we are defined more by who we will be than by who we have been.

I think what we are doing here is learning how to carry some dirt, some holy ground, into our lives. Following Jesus means that we look at our world and realize we are in one sense

never really at home. We live in a particular zip code, but grace has sprinkled holy ground from another kingdom into our shoes, and we are walking toward home. We will be imperfect. The lives we offer God will be a compromise. But choose the best you know how to do — and then, as the prophet said, go in peace.

¹He told this story at Village. He was talking about his book in which this story can be found, John Danforth, *Faith and Politics* (2006), p. 56

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.