Healing from Afar
Proper 23, Year C; October 14, 2001
Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA
Rev. Anita R. Warner
Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Luke 17:11-19; Psalm 111:10
Hymn of the Day: "When Sudden Terror Tears Apart" (Tune used: Kingsfold CMD)
The hymn we have sung, by Carl Daw, Jr. of the Hymn Society, names our lament and our uncertainty in this uncertain age. I love this country, and like so many, mourn the destruction of the lives of thousands in New York and Washington, DC. The hymn also names our uncertainty. This is an anxious time, as new threats to our everyday existence emerge every week. Some continue to ask, "Where is God?"
Our first reading, from 2 Kings, is clear where God was. In the beginning of this story from Israel's history, in the time of the kings, we are introduced to Naaman. He was a great commander in favor with his king because, we are told, God had given Naaman the victory. All well and good, except that Naaman's king was not the king of Israel, but the king of Aram! When Israel wants to know where God is, this story brings a troubling answer: God is giving the victory to the army which threatens them to the northwest.
This great general suffered from leprosy. Israel enters the story in an Israelite taken captive in war, a young girl who was a servant of Naaman's wife. The contrast between this figure and the mighty Naaman could not be greater, and yet without her and her speaking up he would never have been healed. This young girl is the hero of the story, for she imagines God healing this general who has defeated her land and taken her captive. The great commandment of love for the neighbor takes on flesh and blood in this girl. The servant girl simply tells others about the God she knows, the God of Israel, who can heal our diseases. And so, Naaman, sitting at home in modern-day Syria, tells his king what she has said.
Naaman's king sends a letter to king of Israel which states, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy"
Naaman was trying to gain access to the prophet through the normal diplomatic channels of the day. Upon receiving the letter, the king of Israel tore his clothes, the customary expression of shock and dismay. A serious misunderstanding by the Israelite king of the Syrian king's intentions almost started a war. Elisha heard about it and said, "Let him come." Elisha's self-assurance contrasts with the king's agitation. Faith in God allowed him to not be anxious nor overreact, but simply to wait on God to act. Finally, the general found Elisha, in modern-day Jordan, who told him through an intermediary that all he had to do was bathe himself seven times in the Jordan. Naaman was furious. His servant constrained him to obey the prophet and eventually he was healed. Once again, it is an intervention "from below" that moves Naaman toward healing. Naaman's gratitude was great and he tried, unsuccessfully, to offer the prophet a gift. The gift was refused, but Naaman himself returned home with some earth from Israel as a symbol of a newfound faith in the God of Israel.
This story tells us something about God's strange ways of acting. As Israel was reminded in this story, and as we are reminded today, we, the people of God, can no longer despise other peoples. Yes, a few terrorists have carried out deadly criminal acts. They are dangerous to civilized society everywhere and need to be stopped and brought to justice. But just as Israel was shown that God had given the victory to their national enemy to the north, so we dare not assume that God will bless our every act, even in the name of "national security."
Jesus recounted this story of Naaman to the people of his hometown in Luke 4:27: He said, "There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."
The people, hearing this, were enraged. Are we, too, enraged at the idea that God will not always favor Americans over other peoples
of the world?
Or are we willing to join other peoples in crying out to God for healing? Will we join our cries to God with the cries of the Iraqi people, who have lost one and a half million people to disease and starvation in the last 10 years? Will we who no longer have the illusion of security join our cries with the Palestinians who have lived for generations now without security in their homeland? The church leaders in Palestine sent a letter to our ELCA immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks, expressing outrage and deep sorrow for the suffering of our people and loss of our security in our homeland. The letter sorrowfully acknowledges, "Never before have Americans and the Palestinian people had so much in common." We can hear this word, this story and reject the God who sometimes gives others the victory. Or, we can cry out with those who need healing, Jesu epistata elieson hamas—Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.
We are right to call out for healing. We must humbly acknowledge that God alone can bring healing to the many who suffer. God alone can heal our own troubled souls. Ps. 111:10: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (the worship of the Lord).
We must be know that God hears the prayers of Christians, Jews and Muslims and longs for us all to submit ourselves to the will of God, and to live in peace with justice. Qur'an: "The head of wisdom is the fear of Allah."
The particularity of the revelation we have received is that Jesus is Lord. Like the 10 lepers, we have been made clean and can present ourselves before the altar of God as forgiven, free and whole people. Like Naaman, dipping seven times in the Jordan, we have been made whole by a three-fold sprinkling of the cleansing waters of baptism. Like the one Samaritan leper who was cleansed, we sometimes remember to return to God and give thanks for God's mercy toward us. Jesus told this person: "Get up and go on your way: your faith has made you well."
What will your way be this week? Will you listen to the faith of another, that you may learn more of your own? Will you pray for
your own healing, the healing of others, and our nation's healing? Will you give thanks? Will your thanksgiving be an exuberant cheer, a shout? Will it be a quiet but heartfelt prayer? Will your thanksgiving be apparent as you are in conversation with others, telling them simply of the great God you know? Will it be in returning to worship to join God's people here in praise?