

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dale Ann Gray at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 4, 2010.

“The God of Fireworks”

II Kings 5:1-14

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Did you have a good Fourth of July celebration? Did you go to Red, White and Boom? Anybody? Yeah! Did you go to your own community’s fireworks display? Yees! I love fireworks!

I grew up in Lincoln Village, where I used to sit out in the front yard with my fam, and watch the amazing Lincoln Village fireworks! We waited and waited until the sun set, and then one blast would light up the sky! Oh! What a sight! Then we’d wait five minutes or so for the next one. And it was as lovely as the first! Five more minutes and another flare would go up. On and on it went until the finale when, oh . . . five or MORE in pretty rapid succession would cause us to gasp with delight! Last night, Gary and I went to the Dublin fireworks and they were spectacular, absolutely spectacular!

In our Old Testament lesson today, Naaman wanted to see some fireworks. He didn’t get to see them, at least not the way he *thought* he would. But let’s give a little background, let’s set the stage. It is the 9th century BCE. That is before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, before Sargon of Assyria conquered Israel. Elisha has accepted the mantel of the prophet from Elijah. He watched as Elijah was carried heavenward in a fiery chariot, and thus received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. This story is actually one of only two accounts we have of Elisha’s ministry to individuals. He has been ministering for some time in the Northern King-

dom, Israel, and it is a bit odd that the King of Israel does not know he exists, but, nonetheless, Elisha IS a man of God.

Aram was a kingdom just north of the Northern Kingdom, just north of Israel, and they'd been pestering the daylights out of Israel for a while. Aram never conquered Israel, but they were quarrelsome. They sent raiders down in to Israel and they captured loot and people, one of whom was the young girl mentioned in our text, who served Naaman's wife. Naaman was the chief general of Aram's army. He had favor in the sight of the king because he added to the treasury and security of the land, but he was despised in Israel.

Naaman, with all of his power and prestige, and the Hebrew calls him *ish gadol*, man of greatness, still struggled. He had a very personal problem. He had leprosy. All the money in the world could not cure him of leprosy. But the little slave girl said, "Oh, I wish, I wish, I wish that he could go to Samaria, where there is a man of God who CAN cure him!" So, Naaman relays this information to the king, and the king, properly assuming that Elisha, the man of God, the prophet, would have been in the court of the king, sent a letter of introduction for Naaman to the king of Israel. It was only natural for the king of Aram to assume that the king of Israel could, through the prophet, cure Naaman, since the story originated with an Israelite slave girl. But things get all tangled up.

Naaman gets a bad rap for his pride, which DOES almost prevent his healing, but imagine what it took for Naaman to venture into Israel. He is persona non grata in Israel for being the chief raider, for taking away their sons and their daughters. For Naaman to make a very personal excursion into Israel, into the presence of the king, required at the very least a letter of introduction. The king of Israel had no lack of contempt for the king of Aram, nor for Naaman, who kept annoying his country. But the king of Israel jumps to huge conclusions immediately. He assumes the worst of the worst in this fairly straight-forward letter. He cries out in a nervous dither, "What?! Who does he think I am? GOD!!!??? That I can cure leprosy?" Well at least the king knew that only God could cure leprosy. "What does he THINK? I know! This is just some political belly bumping, and he's trying to pick a fight with me!" And he tore

his clothes. Well. Elisha heard the story, sent word, probably through a messenger, to the king of Israel, saying, "Ah, send him my way. I can help."

When I look at this text, it's FULL of trouble. You've got the raiding, people being enslaved, the misunderstanding between the kings and Naaman's pride, to name a few. But let's just look at the most obvious problem. Naaman has leprosy. It's a disease that eats away at you. It's a disease that, we learn in the New Testament, isolates you from community eventually. You have to live in a leper colony. You can no longer associate with family and friends. You cannot even attend synagogue, in the New Testament.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, however, this word refers to a group of various skin diseases. So we don't know if it was what we call leprosy today, but we DO know that it was irksome enough to Naaman for him to gather a lot of resources in order to buy a healing from the man of God. Perhaps in his mind, the price skyrocketed because of who Naaman was. Maybe, in his mind, the going price was only \$300, like it is today, to cure leprosy. Three hundred dollars is all it takes today to cure leprosy. The problem is in finding the isolated regions where people still have it.

But for Naaman, chief raider and troubler of Israel, the price had to be much higher! He took with him 10 talents of silver. One talent weighs seventy-five pounds . . . that's 750 pounds of silver! He took with him 6,000 shekels of gold. One shekel is .4 ounces . . . that's thirty-one gold bars, like those at Fort Knox. And he took with him 10 haute couture Carolina Herrera designer Prophet Gowns. In today's dollars, that's roughly 3.3 million! But, all the kings horses and all the kings men couldn't put Naaman together again.

Do we have leprosy? Well . . . no, and I don't know how many of us have a skin disease, but I believe that we as a nation have a disease that is eating away at us, that could eventually destroy us, and isolate us from the community of nations. It has never been so evident as when you see the tragedy continuing to unfold in the Gulf of Mexico. We are addicted to oil. That may not strike you in

the heart; that may not be the issue you're dealing with, but we ARE dealing with it as a country. I love my Costco, and I love my Trader Joes, but when I go there and come home with produce and goods, Gary comes and looks over my shoulder and says, "Did you see those are from Chile? And those grapes are from California?" How do you think they got here? Our addiction to oil. THAT's how they got here.

I watch the news and I see pictures of seagulls drenched in oil. I watch an oil-covered crab struggle to crawl up a beach in Pensacola. I hear the lament of an 11-year-old girl as her vacationland is despoiled. I witness rough fishermen shed tears of despair while their way of life and livelihood are put on hold, while their families suffer, while they are forced to work for one of the parties responsible for the entire debacle. A scuba-diving reporter dove down into the water with a camera to show us the murky, brown, eerily lifeless water, and as he surfaced, he, too, was baptized in oil, brown goo dripping down his face. The media does not know they are being used by God. They don't know they are on a holy mission. They are holding up a mirror to us. Because that reporter who came up baptized in oil, every bird you see, every crab, that's us . . . drenched in our addiction to oil.

Do you know how far back that addiction goes? Did you see Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* clip of presidents vowing to free us from our "dependence on foreign oil?" Guess how many presidents have recorded that vow. Obama. Clinton. Bush. Reagan. Bush. Carter. Ford. Nixon. Eight. We've tried and we've tried and nothing's working. Or have we tried?

Perhaps you struggle with a personal addiction. Perhaps it's to alcohol. Perhaps it's to prescription drugs. Perhaps it's to food. Perhaps it's to that feeling of being empty. Perhaps you feel as if you are the water, and that defiling oil is spewing out in your soul. Maybe it's not visible yet to the rest of the world, but YOU know it's there. You know in your heart of hearts what you struggle with.

Did God leave Naaman where Naaman found himself? No. God came to Naaman. God came to Naaman several times. Over

and over and over again. The first time, God came to Naaman in hope, by way of a little Israelite slave girl. “Oh that my lord could visit Samaria, for surely the man of God could heal him!” God came to Naaman again in instruction through the messenger of the prophet of God. That’s God twice removed. (Nonchalantly) “Yeah. Go dip in the Jordan seven times and you’ll come up clean.” But Naaman responded with hurt pride. A messenger! For me?! The Hebrew word order gives more emphasis. It says “Surely before ME the prophet would stand!” A lowly messenger?! Are not the Mississippi and the Missouri . . . er . . . the Abana and the Pharpar better than the stinky old Jordan?! He wanted fireworks. He wanted the prophet himself to come out, and call upon the name of God, to wave his magic hand over the spot, and instantly cure his leprosy just (“Z” snap, snap, snap) like that! And he turned away from God in a rage.

But that’s not the way God chose to reveal godself to Naaman. So God came to Naaman again. This time in encouragement via Naaman’s own servants, who call him “Father.” They say, “Oh c’mon. If he’d asked you to do something really really really hard, you’d have done it. Right? Why not this?” God did not leave Naaman where Naaman was. God came to him. When he was baptized in that dirty Jordan River, he finally came up clean.

God will not leave us where we are either. God will come to us through the voice of those oppressed throughout the world. Perhaps obliquely even through the voice of China saying, “What do you mean, WE have to reduce our emissions? OURS are already only 20% PER PERSON what YOURS are. YOU reduce YOURS and then, let’s talk.” Could that be the Israelite slave girl coming to us? Or perhaps God is sending us a messenger with instructions, “You know this way of life is really not sustainable. You need to raise up your young people to investigate alternative fuels, alternative technologies. You need to teach your students to think globally rather than just about the comfort of your own nation.”

We need a broader perspective on this-world-that-God-so-loves for the good of the United States and for the good of the world. God may come to us in our “servants.” The one who repairs our car,

cuts our grass, cashes us out at the register. God will not leave you where you are in your addiction. God will come to you over and over and over again. It may not be in pomp and bluster, it may not appeal to your pride. It probably won't be waving magic words and wands over our affliction in a display of fireworks and ("Z" snap snap snap) it's gone just like that! God has already come to us in Jesus Christ, in love, in mercy, in forgiveness, in cleansing . . . showing us a better way for all people. In Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues to come to us, every step of the way. Perhaps it is in the simple things . . . in the everydayness of our lives that God will come and beckon and baptize us again and again and again and again and again until we finally come up clean.

I'd like to close with a prayer written by Dr. Masaru Emoto, an author, scientist and humanitarian. It's a prayer for the Gulf. I ask you to pray this prayer with me and envision God praying through you, God speaking to the Gulf, but also us confessing.

Let us pray: "I send the energy of love and gratitude to the waters and all living creatures in the Gulf of Mexico and its surroundings. To the whales, dolphins, pelicans, fish, shellfish, planktons, corals, algae . . . humankind . . . to ALL living creatures . . . I am sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I Love You." Amen.