

ALI VANKUIKEN'S SERMON – JULY 3, 2016

Do we have ears to hear what God is saying? Throughout time God has spoken to his people in various ways. God spoke to his people in the Bible and continues to speak to us today. A few ways God speaks is through prophets, in dreams and through angels. Ezekiel was a prophet living at a time when the people of Israel were taken out of their land and forced to live in a foreign country. Ezekiel told the people that God was not confined to the temple in Jerusalem which had been destroyed, but was with them even in a foreign land on a sort of portable throne that Ezekiel saw in a vision. Mary learned about her place in God's plan when she was visited by an angel. She heard God's message in the form of a greeting of great respect that surprised her and filled her with great joy and insight into the power dynamics of her day. God's message gave her the courage and strength to continue on the road she had to tread. God also speaks to us today. I have heard God's message of love and joy from Bishops George Councill and Chip Stokes. I have heard God's message of invitation to join the Jesus movement from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. And perhaps you have had the experience of hearing God speak to you through a dream that at the time you did not fully understand but which gave you a sense of peace and comfort. Or perhaps you have had a chance encounter with a stranger who said just the thing you needed to hear at that moment. But despite God speaking in various ways, we will not hear if we are not listening.

A man came to a farmer's market in New Jersey and approached a farm stand asking for a great deal of sorrel. The farmer was surprised at this request because most people don't know what to do with sorrel and if they do, they normally only need a small amount. So he asked the man why he needed it. The man proceeded to tell the farmer that he had just gotten back from a trip to Arizona to see a witch doctor whom he heard about from a friend of a friend of a friend. And he had undertaken this journey to find a remedy for cancer. The witch doctor had told him about a concoction that required a great deal of sorrel. The farmer gathered up all the sorrel he had and sold it to the man. As the man walked away, the farmer wondered if it was the man himself or someone else whom he loved who had cancer. And he further wondered if the man was so consumed with finding a cure in a distant land that he was missing out on emotional or spiritual healing that was accessible to him here and now. The emotional work of confronting fear and the unknown, or the spiritual healing that comes from facing death in the midst of life.

Our Old Testament lesson today told us the story of Naaman. Naaman was a mighty man, a strong and successful warrior who had undertaken several raids into the land of Israel for his country of Aram. He was well liked by the king and had everything going for him. Only one thing stood in the way of a fulfilling life: he had leprosy, a skin disease. This was so troubling to him that when he heard a rumor of a prophet in a distant land who could heal his disease, he went to the king and sought help in finding him. The king of Aram gave him a letter of introduction and wealth in the form of silver and gold and clothes, and Naaman set off. He came to the king of Israel and gave him the letter. The king was troubled by this letter because he thought it was an attempt by the king of Aram to find a pretext for yet another raid into Israel, so he tore his clothes in distress. Luckily for him the prophet Elisha heard about his distress and sent a message of his own to the king telling him to send Naaman to him and that then he would learn that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman continued on his journey. He arrived at the door of the prophet with his chariots and servants and his great wealth. And as he waited for the prophet to appear, a servant came out instead and gave him a message: wash in the Jordan seven times and you will be clean. A message? Sent by a servant? He didn't come all this way to see a servant! Naaman wanted the prophet himself to come and see him and

wave his hand over the disease, say some special words in a foreign language, and bring him healing. This isn't why Naaman came all the way to Samaria! So he turned away in disgust and he made to return to his homeland after this, his last foray into Samaria, this time defeated.

Like Naaman, we too can be so focused on the healing we think we need we miss healing that is offered to us. We often look for healing from authorities, those we consider experts in the field, and thus we risk looking for healing in narrow ways. When we are physically ill we seek healing from a doctor, from medicine and remedies of any kind. When we have a mental illness we seek out a psychiatrist and the focus then is also often on the medication. When we are spiritually distressed we seek out the religious experts, the Bishop or the Priest. And we think that the healing we need will come in the form of an epiphany. That it will involve a drastic change and we will know it has happened because it will involve a big change. We look for our healing expecting certain things and if our focus is too narrow we risk missing the healing that is available right under our noses. But I believe our healing is accessible to us now, in small ways.

Jesus was fond of saying that the kingdom of God has come near. And we heard him say that in today's Gospel reading from Luke. If the kingdom of God is near then the benefits of the kingdom of God are accessible to us also. Jesus told his disciples that he was sending them out as laborers into the harvest. He sent the 70 into towns and villages to proclaim the kingdom of God, to bring healing, and to be fed by those they served. The disciples were to have their basic needs met by the people they ministered to. I believe that this is how the disciples also found their own healing. For they came back to Jesus with great joy after having experienced being provided for by the communities they served. They did not find their healing alone.

Naaman also did not set out to find his healing because of his own knowledge. He found out about the prophet from his wife, who heard it from their serving girl. A serving girl who was captured on one of those raids that Naaman led into Israel. After being taken from her family and her home and the life she expected to live, this girl was serving a foreign master in a foreign land. But she had the faith, the insight and the wisdom to start Naaman on his journey of healing. And when he was about to walk away from the healing that was offered him, Naaman heard the voices of his servants. "Master, master, if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more so should you follow instructions that are simple?" These were the voices of those who knew what it was to debase themselves and humble themselves on a daily basis. And what they wouldn't have given for simple instructions on how to find their own healing! Naaman listened to his servants. Their voices re-oriented Naaman to his disease. It wasn't leprosy that was holding him back. It was his expectation of what his healing would look like. Once Naaman's eyes were opened, he was free to pursue his healing by dipping in the Jordan seven times.

There are voices urging us to our healing as well. One of those voices might be the voice of someone you know who had suffered deeply, and who has gained wisdom from that suffering that can give you insight into your own difficult journey. Or perhaps it is a voice urging you to look within, to seek greater self-knowledge. A voice urging us to feel our emotions instead of trying to hide from them or distract ourselves from them. For in accepting the difficulties of our past, those realities we wish were not the case, in accepting them we are able to move on and not be trapped by them. And by doing the simple tasks before us we can find our healing. We do not need to travel to a distant land or seek an exotic remedy, instead let us open our eyes and attune ears to the words of God directing us to healing that is right in front of us.