

**Stranger Among Us**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**July 5, 2009**

**Old Testament Lesson -- 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 5:1-14**

<sup>1</sup>Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. <sup>2</sup>Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. <sup>5</sup>And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. <sup>6</sup>He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." <sup>7</sup>When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." <sup>8</sup>But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

<sup>9</sup>So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup>Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." <sup>11</sup>But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! <sup>12</sup>Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. <sup>13</sup>But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" <sup>14</sup>So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

**New Testament Lesson -- Mark 6:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. <sup>7</sup>He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. <sup>8</sup>He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; <sup>9</sup>but to wear



Two very different people; both believing that Jesus can somehow make a difference in their lives, take a step of faith to reach out to Jesus and in so doing, receive healing and wholeness.

The story of Jesus' homecoming reads as if simple unbelief could serve as a shield to ward off Jesus' healing power; as if a person must believe strongly enough as a prerequisite to being healed by Jesus. It might give us the idea that droves of Jesus' friends and neighbors came out to see him and present themselves for healing, but as hard as he tried, Jesus just couldn't penetrate their powerful doubt shields.

But go back to the hemorrhaging woman... when Jesus says "your faith has made you well," he is referring to the fact that her presence there in that crowd shows that she believes that Jesus can heal her; which is the real reason why Jesus was unable to perform any deeds of power in Nazareth... because no one showed up. Unbelief is not the kryptonite that renders Jesus a quivering bowl of Jello, unable to perform miracles or heal the sick. No, Jesus is not thwarted by the towns people's unbelief... he is thwarted by their absence.

Think about it... who would go to Jesus for healing who did not believe that Jesus could heal?

Peter Popoff was a well known faith healer during the 1970's and most of the 80's. At the peak of his popularity he reportedly was earning \$4.3 Million per month mostly from donations made by people who believed that he could perform miracles. Popoff was famous for allegedly hearing the voice of God telling him the names and personal information of members of the congregation and identifying their specific ailments so that he could call them up on-stage and "heal" them. But it was revealed in 1987 that he was actually receiving the information via an in-ear radio which received a broadcast from his wife who had collected the information from the congregants in advance.

After his fraud was revealed to the public on an episode of the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, Peter Popoff was forced to declare bankruptcy because people quit coming to his revivals. It seems that when people no longer believed in him, they stopped coming to him. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Popoff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Popoff))

That's why Jesus was ineffective in his hometown; because the people who knew him so well didn't really believe that he could heal them, so they never gave him the chance. Thus proving that they didn't *really* know him.

But what's really interesting is that, like the people of Nazareth, neither the hemorrhaging woman nor Jairus made any statement of faith about Jesus. They did not address Jesus as "Son of God" or "Messiah." As a matter of fact, when the people come from Jairus' home to tell him that his daughter has died, they refer to Jesus as "teacher."

No, these two make no verbal statement of faith... it is even possible that they have no belief about who Jesus is beyond the fact that they believe he can heal them, but their actions are a statement of faith.

So while this story appears to be about miracles and healing, it is really about FAITH and what it means to have faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

Now there two kinds of Faith- faith as cognitive ascent to a set of beliefs or principles, and faith that is trust.

The first kind of faith believes in the existence of Jesus of Nazareth and in his significance; that he was a real man who lived and taught in Palestine in the earliest part of the first century and was crucified by the Roman Empire for sedition; that he is the Son of God; that in his life death, and resurrection, the fullness of God's love and mercy were revealed and that through him Humanity has been reconciled with God.

The second kind of faith trusts in that Jesus; allowing him to guide us and to live our lives as his disciples.

The difference between believing who Jesus is and trusting him with our lives is like the difference between believing that a bridge will hold you up and actually walking across it.

Or better yet, the Grand Canyon Skyway. Opened in March of 2007, the skyway is a horseshoe shaped *glass* walkway that juts 66 feet out over the Grand Canyon affording visitors a clear view down to the bottom of the canyon some 3600 feet below. That's over a thousand feet higher than the world's tallest skyscraper.

And did I mention that the walls and floor of the skyway are made of 2 inch thick glass?

Now, I've read that according to educated people who know about such things, the Grand Canyon Skyway is perfectly safe. But there's a big difference between knowing it's safe, and walking out onto it...

And that is the nature of faith as we see it here in Mark's gospel. Those who have faith not only know who Jesus is, but are also willing to trust Jesus' with their very lives.

This notion if faith goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Naaman, the subject of our Old Testament lesson this morning, accepted the idea that Israel's God could cure his leprosy, but it took a long journey and a series of immersions in the Jordan River for his faith to be enacted.

Carol Bechtel Reynolds, in her book *Life After Grace*, writes about the Exodus and that moment when the Israelites, fresh from their escape from slavery, find themselves cornered with the Red Sea yawning out towards the horizon before them and the rampaging Egyptian Army rushing up from behind. She writes: "This situation is one of those good news/bad news times in Scripture that we can only really appreciate if we enter into the story as participants. Imagine the thrill of wonder as you feel God's breath on your face and see the waters begin to part. Yet, imagine the thrill of fear when you realize that God means for you to walk between those walls of water... The real miracle of the Red Sea [Carol writes], was not that the waters parted, but *that the people went forward* (Bechtel, *Life After Grace*, pg. 4)."

That's faith as complete trust in God and quite honestly sometimes those first steps of faith and even the ones that come further down the line can be a frightening proposition; as frightening as any clear glass walkway over a 3600 foot drop. But that's what trusting God means, taking those steps every day and believing that the life Christ calls us to is really the best life for us.

So while faith IS acknowledging who Jesus is and what his life, death, and resurrection means for us, that's not all Faith is. Matthew records Jesus as saying "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Matthew 7:21)." Luke records Jesus as asking "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46)"

And it is in the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that we hear the words of Jesus saying "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34-35, Luke 9:23)."

For Jesus, believing IS doing. So faith in Christ can not be just simple acknowledgement of Jesus' divinity. Faith must be becoming a disciple and dedicating ourselves wholeheartedly to the things that Jesus stood for:

Like feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned (Matthew 25:35-36); giving sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 18:18-19); all things Jesus talked about in the gospels.

We remember that at the feeding of the 5000, Jesus told his disciples "you give them something to eat (Matthew 14:16, Mark 6:37, Luke 9:13)" and we recognize that being a disciple means caring for one another."

We remember that Jesus charged the young ruler to keep all the commandments and to "sell all that you own and follow me (Matthew 19:17&21, Mark 10:19&21, Luke 18:18 & 22)" and we recognize that being a disciple means not only obeying the commandments, but also ridding ourselves of whatever stands between us and complete devotion to God."

We remember that Jesus said that the greatest law is to love God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself and we recognize that being a disciple means that we cannot love God if we do not love our neighbors, nor can we love our neighbors if we do not love God (Luke 10:25-28).

We also remember that Jesus extended the commandment to Love to our enemies and those who persecute or abuse us and we recognize that our call to share God's love extends beyond those who are easy to love (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27-28)

And on and on...

But the challenging nature of such a life is troubling because it is so very different from what the world shows us as ideal, and sensible and so often, what we desire. This life of the disciple can be so very frightening and uncomfortable and its rewards can seem so much less tangible than the rewards the world has to offer us.

It is like the young man who during a wilderness hike, slipped and fell over a cliff. He managed to grab onto a shrub growing out of the side of the mountain but was unable to pull himself back up. He called for help for what seemed like hours when he finally heard a voice answering him saying “this is God. I will save you. But first, let go of the bush.” The young man thought for a moment and then called out “is there anyone else up there?”

Like that young man, the key for us is having the courage to let go of what we know and embrace the call of Christ, which means a whole lot of trust.

But we are reminded that the Gospel is to us both comfort and challenge.

It is comfort in that we are reminded that God is our rock and our redeemer; a very present help in time of trouble. As the Psalmist writes “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me...” when we experience the worst of life, we know that we can depend on God; that we can fight through the crowd to touch Jesus’ cloak; that we can kneel before Jesus and ask for help and while we may not get the exact help or answers that we hope for, we can find solace in the words of Paul that “nothing in life or in death, can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).” In that we can believe. In that we can trust.

But the Gospel is also challenge in that every day we are called to be disciples, walking in Jesus’ footsteps, doing the things that Jesus did and living the way that Jesus taught us to live, Loving God, loving our neighbors, and our enemies. But we are called by God and commissioned for the work ahead. In that we can believe. In that we can trust.

I began this morning by saying that had we been in Nazareth for Jesus’ homecoming, we probably would not have believed that Jesus could be any more than the simple carpenter. But here in this holy place, we encounter the risen Christ and we are confronted by the very real question faced by the Nazarenes that day: do we recognize the Son of God in our midst? Do we trust him enough to follow him; to reach out to him; to give our lives to him as disciples every day?

Or is Jesus just a stranger among us?

To God be all honor, glory, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.