

THE REIGN OF GOD 4: HEALING

*Rev Jim Allan
Camrose United Church
12 February 2006*

2 Kings 5: 1-14 - The healing of Naaman
Psalm 30 (responsive reading, with sung refrain), *Voices United*, p. 757
Mark 1: 40-45 - Jesus cleanses a leper

It must have taken much humility for Naaman to go to Israel, a foreign nation, and to this probably-very-little-known prophet Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. But he was well-motivated because leprosy is a terrible disease. And so he goes, and brings an amazing array of wealthy gifts for the king of Israel who thinks he's just trying to start a war. We have a contrast, therefore, between the prestige of Naaman--an official of his country, a militarily-exalted person with wealth and gifts--and his being taken down several notches. He ends up going to visit this Elisha, expecting the prophet to do something impressive. Naaman would of course have a whole entourage who would be watching, and there would be people back home waiting to hear the marvellous story of this magical Elisha and the wonderful things he did. But Elisha doesn't even bother to come out; he just tells Naaman to go and wash in the river. What river? The Jordan. Yuck. Naaman can't even accept what he has been given. He reaches the limit of his humiliation and is about to turn around and walk away. His people, however, persuade him to cooperate.

Washing in the river seven times is perhaps one of the most innocuous things Elisha could have considered. Why would it be so innocuous? Why would there be no skill, no herbs, no powerful things in what Elisha did? Well, Elisha was a prophet. A prophet is one who channels the power of God. A prophet is not a magician. And so by picking something that is so utterly innocuous, he makes it decidedly clear that his is no human skill; it is the action of the sheer power of God.

This provides a foundation for understanding Jesus' work because Jesus was seen as a prophet. He was seen as many other things, of course, but also as a prophet. We tend to misunderstand prophecy when we think of it just as predicting the future. That's part of it, but only a minor part. The centre, the essence, of the role of prophet in ancient Israel was this channel for God's power and presence in the world. God spoke through the prophets and acted through the prophets. And so when people in Jesus' day began to say truly this man is a prophet, that's because they were recognizing the word and the truth and the wisdom and the power of God being channelled through him. Here comes Jesus, out of the wilderness, talking about a time of fulfillment, declaring that the Reign of God--also known as the Kingdom of God--is near.

It's hard to understand the meaning of the statement that "the Kingdom of God is near." In the Lord's Prayer we pray "Thy Kingdom come." I remember as a child hearing the expression "until Kingdom come." It meant something was so long in the future that it was virtually never going to happen--just like my mother waiting for me to come home for supper, or something like that. I don't know how it came about that the expression of the coming of the Kingdom became an idiomatic colloquialism in our culture for something that is so far off in the future that we shouldn't hold our breath waiting for it. But Jesus then demonstrated the nearness of the Kingdom by using the symbols that the prophets had used in their talking about the day of the Lord--namely, the driving out of demons, the healing of the sick. These were symbols that people would have recognized in their understanding of their own Hebrew Scriptures as symbols of the time that Jesus said is fulfilled.

When we speak of the Reign of God we're talking about the power of God--sovereignty--in the world. It's fairly easy to understand sovereignty or power of God in relation to demons because demons possess a person, dominate a person's life, and if they're driven out then God has taken over. But it's not so easy to understand the Reign of God in relation to healing the sick. We have to listen more carefully to the language. I'm already misleading you because we think of Jesus healing the sick, but the Bible didn't say Jesus healed the leper. Did you notice that? Did you notice how I twisted that on you? Who noticed? It didn't say Jesus "healed" the leper; it said he "cleansed" the leper. The Greek word is *katharizo* which is the basis for our word "catharsis" which means "to purge" or "to empty" or "to rid of." And it's about sin.

There are two different ways the New Testament talks about sin. One is the plural "sins" which means "wrongdoings"; but it also speaks of the singular or collective "sin"--a power that is in us, the power of sin in our lives. So again we have healing or sickness turned into the language of power, the sense that there's a power manifested as leprosy in this person's life. But it's a kind of thinking that sees something of the spirit and the essence as well as the external manifestation. And it's that power of sin that is dealt with by the declaration of the Reign of God.

It is a challenge to try and take that into today and to explore how we can use language of "the powers" over against which we as Christians would declare the Reign of God. But I was handed one of the most powerful illustrations I've ever heard about a week ago when I attended the presentation by Stephen Lewis in Camrose at Augustana [Faculty, University of Alberta] on January 30. Lewis was talking about HIV/AIDS in Africa. We might even say HIV/AIDS is the "leprosy" of our day in the sense that there seems to be some spirit behind it that spooks people. We have to get over all this strange kind of fear about it. You all probably heard about the presentation if you weren't there, because Lewis is not only an amazing storyteller and speaker; he's also an amazing person. He's one of those people who entered politics and made a career of it, but he is now a special envoy for the United Nations to Africa. And he has retained that dedication to making a difference in the world, and is making an enormous difference in so many people's lives.

As he was telling the story there were three instances in which he very clearly admitted he didn't know what was going on. It's that same "I don't know what's going on," "I don't understand the powers at work here," that I'm trying to address using what I've mentioned in recent weeks in relation to the work of Walter Wink and his "powers" trilogy--*Naming the Powers, Unmasking the Powers, Engaging the Powers*.

The first instance occurred when Lewis spoke about a group of women growing cabbages--what they called their income-generating project. He was talking with them about this and asking who was being fed by these cabbages. They ate them themselves, and several other people depended on this cabbage patch. Then he asked if they had any left over to sell and generate money. The answer? "Yes we do." He asked what they did with the money. "We use it to buy coffins," was the reply. "There are never enough coffins." Lewis told the assembled group at Augustana that "As I listened to her tell me that, I thought 'Has this world gone mad?'" What that means is that "There's something at work here that I have no idea what's going on. I have no idea what power is at work here." That's what we mean when we say "Has the world gone mad?" Or "Has [so-and-so] gone mad?"

The second instance related to funding. The exciting part of this story is that, from such a depth of suffering, there are various non-governmental organizations (NGO's) raising millions of dollars, including Stephen Lewis' own fund. These millions of dollars are making a profound difference, a huge, enormous, difference in a few people's lives. There are exciting stories of people whose lives are turned around by drugs, and by the help they can get in dealing with this virus. However, the solution is not to be had with millions; it's to be had only with billions. But

billions don't come from NGO's; rather, from the countries of the world. Lewis's second point, therefore, arose when he talked about the 2005 G-8 Summit in Gleneagles (Scotland) at which the HIV/AIDS issue in Africa was a major part of their agenda. They reached agreements, exciting-sounding agreements, which included billions of dollars in funding for African AIDS relief in the coming year. But, Lewis said, eight weeks--only eight weeks--after Gleneagles the plan had been changed and the funding available for Africa the following year was less than half of what had been pledged at Gleneagles. He said he had no idea how that happened. We're not talking about some naïve little person who never reads the newspaper and doesn't understand politics. We're talking about one of the most informed and knowledgeable and experienced people about global politics in the world, standing there in front of 900 people at Augustana and saying "I have no idea what happened." How can billions of dollars in funding be cut? How can that have turned around?

This is, therefore, a second instance where he's really saying--or at least what I hear listening between the lines--there is a power at work, and it's an enormous power. We're talking about international agreements and billions of dollars. There's a power at work here that we can't name, and if we can't name it, we can't unmask it, and if we can't unmask it, we can't engage it. And so we have to settle for the NGO's with their millions helping a few people. The solution continues to elude us.

The third instance occurred when he talked about his work. One of the things he tries to do when talking to people in Africa is to understand what kind of help they need, and to determine what we can do that will make the greatest difference. In other words, how can we best use these millions that we have. The people don't come out and say it in so many words but, Lewis commented, as he listened deeply (between the lines, as it were) during one particular meeting with a group of women, he "heard" these people saying "White man, our suffering is overwhelming and you have the medicine to put an end to our suffering." "At that moment," Lewis said, "I found myself just utterly at a loss. I cannot explain how it can be that we in our developed nations have the medicine to put an end to the suffering and yet the suffering continues." He didn't blame it on a government, he didn't blame it on people, he didn't blame it on anything. He just said, "I can't explain it."

So what I hear is that there's a power at work here. And in order to make a difference, a real difference in the world, we need to be able to name that power. And it's a spiritual power; that's why we can't name it. Our secular world, our modernist, secular world, has these blinkers on that shuts out the spiritual and looks for all the explanations and solutions in the surface appearance of things. Who other than the church is going to that, to name the powers? It's difficult for us, too, because when we name the powers they become very frightening to us. We start to think of them as if they were almost gods, as if they are rival beings to the God of Israel and the God of the Christian church. Wink¹ says these are not beings that have an existence apart from the nations, the organizations, the people, the families through which they operate. But they are real. He points out as an illustration that in ancient Israel and in Jesus' time there were many nations that had gods, and Israel never denied the existence of the gods. In Jesus' time the Roman Empire was a god-like, worship cult, and there wasn't any denial of the gods. The world is full of gods. The declaration of the Reign of God is a denial of the ultimacy of the gods.

Perhaps today we don't name those powers as gods; "gods" was just the metaphorical language of their time. Maybe we need a different way to name the powers, but we need to name them because, first of all, they're real. Secondly, they are not ultimate. The proclamation of Jesus and therefore part of the mission of the church, the proclamation of the Reign of God, is the

¹ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, "The Invisible Powers That Determine Human Existence" (Fortress, 1986) p. 88.

declaration that the powers in the world are not ultimate. It is the declaration that in the council of the gods one God reigns supreme. The Gospel, the good news, the message that Jesus brings, is that the Reign of God denies the ultimacy of all those powers. But it also offers us three opportunities that would result, according to Wink², from this naming and unmasking and engaging of the powers.

The first opportunity--at this point he's speaking about the nations, but it's true of organizations, and families, even the church--is that it enables us to unmask the apostasy of our nations. The second is that it enables us to discern the vocation, the calling or true purpose, of the nations. Nations and organizations possessed by powers that are not God lose their sense of true purpose; they lose their way. The good news is that in engaging the powers--and this is the third opportunity--we enable the institutions and the nations of our world to find again their true purpose. Then, and I think this is so beautiful, Wink says it also enables us to love more faithfully the organizations, the institutions, the nations of our world. It enables us to love them more faithfully when we are able to name the apostasy--the unfaithfulness--and to name the true vocation. In so doing we can truly love our nations and institutions and therefore tend them, minister to them, care for them, and bring them back to the best that they are intended to be.

And so it becomes our way, it becomes our way to pray with Christians all around the world. It is well said in the theme of World Council's Ninth Assembly this year in Brazil. The theme is really a prayer; it's simply "God in your grace, transform the world." So I invite you to hold that prayer in your hearts in the coming weeks as thousands of people from churches all around the world gather to name the powers, to unmask the powers, to engage the powers and to find again the true supremacy, the true Reign of God.

The prayer is also expressed in our next hymn, number 700, which is perhaps a hymn we can hold as a joining with our sisters and brothers in the churches all around the world:

God of freedom, God of justice, you whose love is strong as death, you who saw the dark of prison, you who knew the price of faith: touch our world of sad oppression with your Spirit's healing breath.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor

² Ibid. p. 99.