

2 Kings 7:3-9 (NRSV)

³Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate, who said to one another, 'Why should we sit here until we die? ⁴If we say, "Let us enter the city", the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; but if we sit here, we shall also die. Therefore, let us desert to the Aramean camp; if they spare our lives, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die.' ⁵So they arose at twilight to go to the Aramean camp; but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp, there was no one there at all. ⁶For the Lord had caused the Aramean army to hear the sound of chariots and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "The king of Israel has hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight against us." ⁷So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving the camp just as it was, and fled for their lives. ⁸When these leprous men had come to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent, ate and drank, carried off silver, gold, and clothing, and went and hid them. Then they came back, entered another tent, carried off things from it, and went and hid them. ⁹Then they said to one another, 'What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, we will be found guilty; therefore let us go and tell the king's household.'

Deal or no deal. It can be a pretty tough choice sometimes.

Today, we meet four men who discovered that God was leading them through a deal they could never have imagined.

Pressure. Always pressure. This was the life of ancient Israel, positioned between two highways that every king, emperor, or pharaoh worth his salt wanted to control. To the east of Israel sat the King's Highway, linking the Arabian riches with the caravan city of Damascus. To Israel's west, alongside the Mediterranean, sat the Intercoastal Highway, linking Egypt to Damascus and the great Mesopotamian civilizations. The land that God had given his people was strategically important and coveted by all.

Whether Israel was united, as it was under Saul, David, and Solomon, or divided into the rival Israelite kingdoms of Judah in the south and Israel in the north,¹ the people of God were under constant pressure on their borders. For century after century, land was taken and lost, cities were besieged, burned, and rebuilt. There was never a time when enemies did not lurk at the Israelites' door and often these enemies succeeded in smashing it down.

In the mid-ninth century BC, Israel, the northern kingdom, faced a looming threat posed by the Arameans.² They were a Semitic people who had coalesced into several kingdoms over the previous couple of centuries. The strongest of these kingdoms was to the northeast of Israel and was centered upon the city of Damascus, and, hence, was known as Aram-Damascus.

The story of the Israelites' struggles with the Aram-Damascus kings from this time is told in 2 Kings 6-8. The chronology of these chapters poses some problems. We can't be sure exactly which Aramean king is being referred and it is also possible that the stories are not told chronologically but for dramatic purposes. We learn that in addition to fending off a threat on the northern border with Aram-Damascus, the Israelites must deal with an Aramean siege of the capital city, Samaria. The Israelites would have understood that the loss of their capital city would mean the loss of their nation and independence.

¹After the death of King Solomon, in 922BC the united kingdom of Israel split in two: Judah in the South with its capital (and the temple) in Jerusalem and Israel in the north with its capital in the city of Samaria. Samaria was located inland roughly halfway between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee. The northern kingdom, Israel, was overrun by the Assyrians in 721BC and was never a viable nation again, as many of its people were exiled and dispersed by the Assyrians. The city of Samaria would give its name to the area between Judea and Galilee in the time of Jesus. The inhabitants of this area, known as Samaritans, were despised by the Jews of Jesus' day. Most travelers from Galilee to Jerusalem chose to go south via the Jordan River valley rather than pass through the area of Samaria.

²The Arameans and the Hebrews were ethnically related, as Abraham was from the area later known as Aram in southern Turkey. The Arameans' language was a Semitic dialect very similar to Hebrew. Aramaic was adopted by other people of the region and became the major language of the western Persian empire, which stretched down into the Nile River valley. Thus, Aramaic became the everyday language of the Jews in Judea and Galilee.

Four lepers

For much of human history, sieges were the preferred and sometimes the only means of capturing a city. Cities were built on elevated hills or mountaintops that were easily defended and then surrounded by sturdy walls. So long as a city had a large supply of grain and a source of fresh water within its walls, they could hold out for longer than many besiegers were willing to wait.

Samaria, however, was such a prize that the Aramean king was willing to wait a long time. As the siege dragged out, famine set in. There was so little food, we are told (6:24), that a donkey's head was selling for about \$400, despite it being the least edible portion of an "unclean" animal. There were even stories of cannibalism circulating around the city (6:28-31). When all seems lost, the prophet Elisha reassures the Israelite king that God has not abandoned them but that on the next day(!) seven quarts of flour would sell for \$5.

After informing us of Elisha's astounding promise to the king, the writer draws our attention to four lepers³ sitting near the city gate. Things in the city are so bad that the lepers assume they are bound to die whether they go back into the city or simply remain where they are. They are already outcasts among their own people, so perhaps they figure they ought to go ahead and make their estrangement official. In any event, they decide to turn themselves into the Aramean camp (as if the Arameans will want them?!).

But when they get to the Aramean camp they find it deserted. The Arameans had dropped everything in their haste to flee. Why? Because they heard a mighty army coming across the hills and were so terrified that they ran fast and far. The Israelites had mounted no such army, so what did the Arameans hear? They heard the LORD (7:5). This was God's work and God's alone.

When our four lepers enter the abandoned camp, they do what most of us would do. They eat and drink their fill. They also pick up some of the Aramean treasure and hide it. But one of them has a pang of conscience and a stab of fear. It is wrong for them to keep this good news⁴ to themselves (the conscience); when the Israelites find out what happened the four men will be found guilty (the fear). So the four men return to Samaria and tell the gatekeepers what has happened. When word gets to the king, he is naturally enough suspicious, fearful that the Arameans have set an attractive trap. But the king's chariots soon learn the truth – the Arameans have fled for good. As the good news spreads across the city, the price of food plummets, just as Elisha promised.

Deal, no deal, or God's deal?

It is pretty hard to tell from the story exactly what to make of the four lepers. Their decision to abandon the Israelites and give themselves over to the Arameans, though understandable, was certainly not admirable. The four lepers, though societal outcasts, were among God's covenant people. Leaving the covenant to seek safety among the Arameans was a faithless act. Yet, after a brief time of self-indulgence they returned to Samaria. In the text, their motives are ambiguous – is it conscience or fear that drives them back the city? It seems to be mostly fear of being caught.

So perhaps this story isn't so much about a "deal or no deal" offered the men, as it is about the truth that God is faithful and that "God's deal" is working its way forward even if we can't see how and have no clue whether we should open the briefcase or take the deal. Elisha simply trusted that God would cause to happen what God had promised – the price of food would plummet in a single day. The "how" . . . well, you can bet even Elisha was surprised by the flight of the Aramean army.

In the end, the good news of God's salvation was delivered by four outcasts, the most unlikely of messengers. I guess it doesn't really matter why the lepers brought God's Good News to the city. What matters is that they brought it.

³Though the traditional way to translate the Hebrew here is "leprosy" most scholars agree that the Hebrew is only referring to skin afflictions of some kind, not necessarily leprosy, "Hansen's disease." Nonetheless, we are meant to grasp that these men suffer not only from a physical affliction but also social ostracism. These men are among society's low and outcast, the last ones whom any Jew would expect God to use. Like the rest of the ancient world, Jews saw afflictions of this sort as being a punishment from God for wrongs the person or their family had committed.

⁴It is worth noting that when Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, translated their scriptures from Hebrew into Greek in about 200 BC, the Greek used here for this "good news" was *evangelion*, the same word used in the New Testament for the Good News/Gospel/Glad Tidings of Jesus Christ. Salvation is always good news to be proclaimed.

Going to the Garden

As you may know, my family and I were especially blessed recently. In June, we took a trip to the eastern Mediterranean with a couple of dozen other St. Andrew members. It was a remarkable trip, encompassing most of the biblical geography, from pharaoh's pyramids to the hills of Galilee to the journeys of Paul. Certainly, the highlight for us all was the chance to spend a day and a half in Israel; many of us had thought we'd never have the chance to go. We spent one afternoon and evening in Jerusalem and all the next day in Galilee. My head and heart are still awash in all that we did and saw, but one of the most special times for me was our visit to the Garden of Gethsemane.

There are not as many "A" places in Jerusalem as you might think, if by "A" you mean places where Jesus walked and taught. Modern-day "old" Jerusalem is a full story above the city of Jesus' day. You have to dig down through 2,000 years of accumulated city rubble to reach the street level of 30AD. Yet, not far outside the eastern city wall is the Garden of Gethsemane. The garden sits just the other side of the valley that separates the city (built on a hilltop) from the Mt. of Olives. The garden is a small place, with ancient olive trees ("Gethsemane" is from the Hebrew for "olive press") on both sides of a simple church. Some of the olive trees in the garden are believed to date to Jesus' day, which is possible in that other ancient olive trees have proved to be more than 2,000 years old.

After spending some time in the small church, around a rock long revered as the rock where Jesus prayed the night of his arrest, our group had a devotional in the garden, where we prayed and we remembered. It was a time that will always be with me.

Anyone visiting the garden would have to be struck by Jesus' faithfulness to the vocation given him by his Father. The city wall and its gates sit high on the hillside opposite the garden. The night of his arrest, Jesus would have seen the arresting party leave the city and make their way down the hillside and across the valley. It isn't very far, but it would have taken them some time. Plenty of time for Jesus to escape out the back of the garden and into the Judean wilderness to the east – where no one could have found him. Yet he didn't, knowing full well that his path was taking him toward a Roman cross. Remarkably, Jesus' faithfulness to this vocation demonstrated God's faithfulness to the covenant he had made long before with Abraham, a promise that one day all creation would be put right. And at Golgotha, just outside the city walls to the west, it was.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JULY 15 - 21

Sunday, Mark 1 Jesus begins his public ministry. Why do you think Mark tells us nothing about Jesus' life up to this time? What is John the Baptizer's mission? What are Jesus' first words? What do they mean to you? Does the "unclean spirit" know Jesus' identity? What do you think was Jesus' basic message as he preached throughout Galilee?

Monday, Mark 2 Chapters 2 and 3 are about growing controversies in Capernaum. What is the nature of these controversies? What are the scribes' concerns about Jesus? What is Jesus' response to these questions? Make a list of the controversies ignited in this chapter. What do you think Jesus was doing in all this?

Tuesday, Mark 3 Why does Jesus choose twelve apostles, not eleven or thirteen? Why is Jesus accused of being in league with "Beelzebul?" In all, what do you make of the demons in this gospel and the others? There are numerous stories. Could there be any overarching theme across these encounters?

Wednesday, Mark 4 From the stories of controversy, we now turn to Jesus' kingdom parables. What is the purpose of teaching in parables? Generally, look for a single key point in each parable. What do you think is that main point in the parable of the sower? How about the parable of the mustard seed?

Thursday, Mark 4:35-6:6a When Jesus goes to Gerasene on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, there are many elements in the story that the Jews would find horrifying: pigs, graves, and Gentiles. When the bleeding woman is healed, it is not only her body that is healed but her relationship with those who would have ostracized her. What do these two episodes tell you about the nature of Jesus' ministry?

Friday, Mark 6:6b-6:56 What is the mission of the twelve? Why do you think Mark devotes so much space to the story of John the Baptizer's execution? Do you think there is meaning in the fact that the feeding of the multitude is followed "immediately" by Jesus' walking on water?

Saturday, Mark 7 Why do you think Mark explains certain Jewish practices (7:3-4)? What is Jesus trying to teach the Pharisees about Jewish food laws? How does this fit into Jesus' other teachings and actions about the Law?

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by taking a few minutes to read the whole story of the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings 6:24-7:20. There is much more than I had space for in this study: the whole story of the king's loss of faith in the power of God (6:27), his abandonment of hope, and his abdication of responsibility; the grace extended to the faithless king; and the officer who scoffed at Elisha's promise of salvation and thus lost out on the salvation when it came.

Like so many of the Old Testament stories, it can be hard to sort out what God would have us take away from the story. Certainly, we grasp the contrast the faithlessness of the king with the faithfulness of God. We also embrace God's choosing of the weak and outcast to be the bearers of the Good News, the *evangelion*. But we're not so sure what to think of the lepers themselves. Indeed, the text seems to be purposely ambiguous about their motives.

What do you see in the story of the lepers? How would you tell their story to someone else? Were they heroes? Why do you think God chose lepers to deliver the good news? Did God choose them? Or did God use their choices made in weakness to bring about God's purposes? How do you think God uses us? Would we always know it? How could we know when God is using someone else?

Perhaps the message is something like this. Life throws at us one choice, one deal, after another. Sometimes the way forward, God's way, seems pretty clear to us. Other times, it isn't clear at all and no amount of praying or thinking or talking seems to make it clearer. Do we take the deal or not? Sometimes we just have to make a decision and press ahead. But even amidst difficult decisions, we are to remain confident in our surprising God, who can lead us where we'd never imagine we'd go. Will we remain ever-confident that, as Paul wrote to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those love the God . . ." and that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28, 37-39).