

Expand Your Zone

20th Weekend in Kingdomtide – October 1/2, 2005
Sermon Background Study

2 Kings 5:8-14 (NRSV)

[Naaman is an important commander in a foreign army, a gentile. He is afflicted with a horrible skin disease. When a captured Israelite girl tells him of a great prophet who can cure him, Naaman makes the diplomatic arrangements needed to visit the prophet Elisha in Israel. The king of Israel is none too happy about the whole thing!]

⁸But 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.” ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” ¹¹But 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!” ¹²Are not Abana and Parpar, 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. ¹³But 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?’” ¹⁴So 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.

[After he is healed, Naaman acknowledges that Elisha’s God is Lord of all the earth. Naaman offers Elisha gifts but is refused. Naaman then asks to take home bags of dirt from Israel for he desires to be a worshiper of Yahweh. But Naaman knows that, being the king’s right-hand man, he will have to bow before a pagan God, so he asks Elisha’s forgiveness for this. Elisha offers neither permission nor condemnation to Naaman, he simply tells Naaman to “go in peace.”]

It is very easy to fall into a nice, comfortable spiritual comfort zone. But our Christian journey is about expanding that zone, growing to trust God more and more. Building trust with anyone, even God, requires being vulnerable and taking risks.

Elijah gets most of the press. He defeats the prophets of Baal at a virtual Super Bowl of “God-competition” (1 Kings 18). He doesn’t die at the end of his ministry, he ascends to the heavens in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2)! Even though Elijah passes his prophetic mantle on to Elisha, even though Elisha performs miracles every bit as astounding to people as Elijah . . . well, many of us have hardly heard of him. The similarity of the two men’s names makes the problem worse. Maybe today’s story will etch *Elisha* indelibly into our hearts. It is quite a story!

A desperate man takes a big risk

Naaman was a VIP, the victorious commander of the King of Aram’s (Syria) army, the king’s right-hand man. But despite his successes, Naaman was a desperate man. He suffered from a skin disease that made him a social outcast and could even kill him.

Aramean raiders had captured a young Israelite girl, whom they brought to Naaman so that she could serve in his household. When the girl learned of Naaman’s illness, she approached Naaman’s wife, telling her of a prophet in Israel who could cure the disease. This posed a problem as Aram and Israel were enemies. Naaman himself had defeated the Israelites in battle! Nonetheless, he took the risk of approaching his king, asking that the king send a letter to the king of Israel. The king agreed to send the letter, so Naaman packed up lots of gifts and headed for Israel. When the king of Israel read the letter, he figured that the bizarre

The Book of Kings

The book of Kings is a single narrative. It was divided into two books (1 Kings and 2 Kings in our Bibles) when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek about 200 years before Jesus. Kings, like Samuel and Chronicles, was too long to fit on a single scroll.

Kings tells the story of God and his people from the death of King David (around 1000 BC) to the Babylonian exile in 587BC. In it, we find the Jews’ theological understanding of their own history. The writers and editors did not gloss over Israel’s unfaithfulness nor those of its leaders. The story of David’s adultery is told here, though it is not told in Chronicles. Most of the kings of Israel and Judah got bad report cards. The book gives ample explanation for the Jews’ exile. Yet, we also find great reason for hope. Elijah and God’s triumph over the priests of Baal. Elisha and the conversion of Naaman. Even Josiah, the model of a faithful king.

¹The Hebrew word here was used to denote several different skin diseases, of which leprosy was just one.

request to cure Naaman's disease was no more than a pretext for war. What did the king know about curing leprosy ~ or any other disease for that matter.

But Elisha intervened with the king and agreed to a visit from Naaman. Though Naaman had taken a big risk going to Israel in the first place, when he got to Elisha's home, he refused to do as Elisha instructed. Go bathe in the river!? Surely there had to be more to this miracle than that. Naaman had plenty of rivers at home. Couldn't Elisha make a bigger deal out of it? Naaman as an important man.² Say a few magic words. Place his hands on Naaman. Something! Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. His servants convinced Naaman to give it a try. He did and was cured, gaining skin like that of a young boy.

Taking the first step

It is not hard to understand why Naaman took the big risk of seeking out Elisha in Israel. It is pretty easy to take risks when you're desperate. But why did he balk when he got to Elisha's house? Why not simply do as Elisha said. Yet also to the point, why make Naaman wash at all?

John Ortberg³ notes that God often wants us to take the first step. When God calls Moses to confront Pharaoh, Moses balks. So God tells him to drop his staff on the ground, where it turns into a snake. God then tells Moses to pick the snake up by the tail. Moses must take the first step. Peter must climb out of the boat before he has the opportunity to walk on water. Naaman must go down to the river and bathe.

Perhaps God asks us to take the first steps so that we might learn that faith and obedience and trust are all bound up together. Our obedience, our taking that first step, is how faith grows. Naaman's obedience is the concrete expression, the incarnation, of his faith. It is the same with Moses. It is the same with you and me. It is by taking one small trusting step followed by a second and then a third that we learn to walk by faith, to trust God even when it seems crazy or impossible or simply too hard.

This isn't really much different from how we learn to trust anyone. We take small steps, learn that the other person is worthy of our trust, and watch the bonds of trust spiral upward. Trust between two persons has to be nurtured and protected. Faith in God is no different. We have to learn to expand what Ortberg calls our "spiritual comfort zone."

Our spiritual comfort zone

The truth is that most of us don't equate risk-taking with our faith. Church is all about being comfortable, right? Certainly, our faith ought to be comforting, but genuine discipleship has to entail risks. At times in the history of Christianity, the risks were to life and liberty. And for some Christians in our world, those are still the risks. For us though, here at St. Andrew, the risks are more subtle, yet still powerful. Won't others think I'm weird if I pray in public? Do I really have to witness to others, even if it is to a Person of Peace? Won't my friends think I'm a prude if they find out there are movies I just won't see or television I just won't watch? Jesus doesn't really expect me to give sacrificially does he? It is hard enough to keep up with my neighbors around here!

We could all come up with lists of the risks and fears that hold us back. Though Peter stepped out of the boat, the other disciples stayed in. Something held them back. It may have been an understandable fear, but it still kept them from walking on water.

Each small step we take expands our comfort zone. We trust God, take that first step, and discover anew that God is faithful, often in ways that surprise us. Then we take another step. Imagine your spiritual comfort zone to be a circle with you in the center. Each step of faith you take - big or small - leads you outward, enlarging your spiritual comfort zone. Steps that once looked like risks now seem routine. What were once fears become confident expectations of God's trustworthiness.

Back to Naaman. . . . After stepping out of his comfort zone, Naaman bathed and was healed. He came to faith in the LORD God. He didn't understand much about God. He thought he needed to take some Israelite dirt home! He asked Elisha for the okay to bow before pagan gods if his job demanded it. But he had taken the first step . . . and I bet he took many more.

²The English translation doesn't bring this out, but the Hebrew makes clear that Naaman's ego is wounded by Elisha's simple instructions.

³Ortberg's book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to get Out of the Boat*, is the inspiration for this sermon series and also my September book recommendation. You can pick up a copy in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Daily Bible Readings

(more risk-taking and first steps)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 4:1-5 Moses is expected to pick up a snake.</p>	<p>Day 2 2 Kings 5 The entire story of Naaman, including the treachery of Elisha's servant.</p>
<p>Day 3 Judges 7 Gideon must winnow down his army from 32,000 to 300 before God will give them victory over the Midianites. Just imagine you are the commander and God says to use 1% of your forces!</p>	<p>Day 4 John 3 Nicodemus steps way out of his comfort zone, coming to see Jesus in the night.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 2:14-41 Despite his earlier failings, Peter rises to speak in the temple, confronting all those who opposed Jesus - "God has made this Jesus, <u>whom you crucified</u>, both Lord and Messiah."</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

September Book Recommendation

If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat, by John Ortberg

A passionate disciple of Jesus Christ lives a life built upon trusting God and acting on that trust. That means being willing to take risks, to leave our spiritual comfort zone. In this book, John Ortberg invites us to consider the incredible potential that awaits us outside our comfort zone. Peter stepped out of the boat when his Lord said "Come." Will we?

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

Getting Out of the Boat

This sermon and teaching series continues through October 16.

We hope you'll join us in Wesley Hall at 9:30 as Scott Engle takes a closer look at what it means to be a risk-taking Christian. Also, Debbie Lyons will be leading a discussion oriented class at 11:00. This series will be based on John Ortberg's book and will challenge our all-too-comfortable Christianity. Discover the incredible potential that awaits us if we are only willing to risk it all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Risk-taking . . . What does risk-taking really have to do with being a Christian, with being a genuine disciple? How does risk-taking help us to become more trusting and faithful? You might begin this week by making a list of risks that you think God might expect Christians to take. What are some? What do we risk? What do we not risk as we seek to be genuine disciples?

If you have trouble coming up with a list, consider whether we might be blinded to some of the risks. If you think that being Christian is about no more than being happy and being nice, then it might be hard to see much risk in it. Yet, the Bible is replete with stories of people who had to take big risks if they were to stay true to God. Just remember Daniel in the lions' den. We are not going to be asked to climb into a den of lions, but still, how can we go about learning how better to discern the risks that God hopes we will take?

What about being a Christian or going to church makes you the most uncomfortable? When has God asked you to take the first step? What is one step you could take today that would expand your spiritual comfort zone? What might hold you back? What might be a second step? A third? Perhaps it has to do with the management of your time. Maybe it has to do with money. Certainly, many Christians get uncomfortable when it is time for the stewardship campaign! The key is coming to understand that taking risks, taking the first steps, is how we learn to trust God in all things, not just in the safe things.