

July 3, 2016 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost
II Kings 5:1-14
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Some years ago there developed a craze of the popular children's game, "Where's Waldo?" Waldo was this tall, late teen, early 20-something guy, nerdy-looking with big round glasses, usually wearing a striped T-shirt and jeans. It was like a modern visual version of that old game "Hide and Seek". There were game books filled with pictures of Waldo hidden in all sorts of places – in the library, at the mall, at an amusement park, in the woods, at the beach in a throng of beach goers, in the crowds of a busy city. The Waldo craze led to some entertaining spin-offs. One was a PBS children's show called "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?" about a famous detective, a "gumshoe" who trekked the globe and could show up anywhere in the world, inconspicuously teaching kids about world geography. Even major network news got in on the craze. For several weeks, the NBC morning news, "The Today Show" teased its watchers to stay tuned to see "where in the world is Matt Lauer?", as he would broadcast the news from some undisclosed location.

Sometimes living the life of faith is like that, isn't it? There are times when we scratch our heads and ask, "Where in the world is God going to show up next?" More often than not, it's in those out-of-the-way places that we would not think to look for God. Today's Old Testament reading is a good case in point.

This character Naaman is quite intriguing. His story has a happy ending, because he finds the cure he is looking for, but this story is about more than a man being cured of disease. It's really about healing and wholeness, and it is also about conversion. We meet in the story from II Kings this mighty military leader, Naaman. He has a distinct worldview, with clear expectations and confident knowledge of how the world operates. He strikes a commanding presence. He is successful and well-respected. In his world, the people with power control the cards, and make things happen. Prestige and wealth and influence are supposed to get you whatever it is you need and want, including health and wholeness – except it hasn't worked out that way for Naaman.

Naaman is looking for a cure to rid him of shame and the social indignity of having leprosy. He is not looking for a new god. Plain and simple, he just wants to be rid of the hideous leprosy that disfigures him, and he is mighty desperate to find a cure. But as the God of Scripture is prone to do, God shows up smack dab in the middle of human hubris and misunderstanding and neediness, and turns the typical and expected human way of doing things upside down, or right side-up, depending on your perspective.

When we meet Naaman, he is at the end of his rope, and willing to consider just about anything that might help him find a cure. Whatever other remedies he has tried to heal his skin condition, have failed. So when the information reaches him, albeit from an unnamed and seemingly unimportant young slave girl, that there is a prophet in Samaria who can heal, Naaman wastes no time! He gets his king's blessing in writing

and sets off, carrying the king's letter and riches enough to pay handsomely for his cure. Naaman's desperation, tinged now with hope, leads him to believe his luck really is about to change.

After Naaman meets face to face with the king of Israel, to whom he presents the letter from the king of Aram requesting healing for this his five-star general, Naaman is directed to the house of the Hebrew prophet Elisha. He goes willingly, carrying with him the silver and gold and ten sets of garments he has brought with him as a payment. But when Naaman shows up at Elisha's house, Elisha doesn't even go out to greet Naaman. He sends out a messenger with these specific instructions: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

My favorite is the part of the story that comes next:

Naaman throws a temper tantrum! He is miffed, his pride has been dealt a serious blow, and he nearly sabotages his own cure. Fortunately for him, Naaman's servant have the good sense to subtly challenge his indignation and coax him to reconsider, rather than just leave, walking away in a huff, mad and offended. They remind him that a great military leader as he is, this direction he has been given is very small potatoes for him. Of course he is capable of much more difficult things than washing in the Jordan River seven times. What could it hurt to do this one thing, simple and silly as it sounds? So down to the Jordan to wash seven times Naaman goes. And "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was healed."

Naaman is cured of his leprosy, but so much more happens to him in this encounter. Deeper healing happens when he sets aside his pride, entitled attitude, and cherished notions of how the world is supposed to work, according to the Naaman manual. Naaman is healed when he surrenders his need to be in charge and call the shots. Healed when he surrenders the need to protect his self-image at all costs. Healed when he listens to the prophet's unconventional direction, and accepts help from this Holy, strange, and to him, unknown God of Israel, One who is able to do for him what he cannot do for himself. This is a God who crosses human made boundaries to bring new life.

Naaman is healed, and then even has a sort of conversion experience, which is described in the next few verses immediately following where today's Old Testament reading ends. Naaman says to Elisha: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel", and Naaman offers Elisha the gifts he has brought, but Elisha refuses to accept the gifts of silver, gold, and garments. So Naaman asks if Elisha would give him two mule-loads of earth to take with him, so that he can worship Elisha's God, the idea being that a god could not be worshiped apart from his own land. Naaman promises to no longer make burnt offerings or sacrifices to any god except the Lord.

I don't know about you, but I can relate to Naaman, because there is a lot in the trajectory of Naaman's story that shows up at times in my life. I know about confident, determined self-reliance. The clinging to cherished ideas about how the world and God are supposed to work. And even at times, the temper tantrums. We do it, too, don't we

– get in the way of our own healing, growth, and transformation, because we think we have figured out how and where God needs to show up and act in our lives. And God just keeps on surprising us!

Friends, at least one thing this story does is invite us to get out of our own way, to let go of our agendas and let God do what God does best – heal us, make believers out of us, surprise us with grace that cannot be tamed, predicted or understood. Grace that simply has to be accepted, and allowed to continue shaping us into the people God calls us to be.

Where in the world is God? Always in the places and situations and people we would least expect to find God. In our struggles and doubts. In our fears and tears. In all the world's places of brokenness, pain, suffering, and dis-ease. In those who are very different from us. And in the least, last, lost, lonely, and left out – those seemingly little and insignificant ones – like the unnamed servant slave girl in the II Kings story, who anonymously and indirectly offered Naaman hope, by pointing him to one who she knew had the power to heal.

Where in the world is God? So very near us that we nearly miss recognizing that it is God acting on our behalf. Someone has said that coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous. God is there – in the wise, guiding grace that goes ahead of us – like Naaman's servants, coaxing him to step back, to exercise common sense and set aside his emotional reactivity to consider that this path in front of him could be a new life-giving path. God is there, in the sustaining grace that comes behind us, the strengthening grace that is present at our right hand and at our left – grace that we recognize when we think back on our past experiences of God's goodness and care, especially in times of distress. God is there – in the healing, peace-bringing grace that fills our hearts in times of silence and prayer, in anointing oil, in baptismal water at the font, and at the table in bread and cup. God is there – in the caring and supporting grace we receive in the greetings of those who sit next to us here today. God is there – in the tender, holy, joyful and life-giving grace felt in the touch of a hand, and seen in the faces of those with whom we share our homes and hearts.

Where in the world is God? We won't hear this question asked nor any possible answers given to this question in the daily latest-breaking headline news. But we gather together here each week to be reminded that we live in a grace-infused world. This is the lead line of God's good news story, our story. We live and breathe grace. There is nowhere we can go that God is not present with us, working on our behalf in ways we cannot see or comprehend. There is nothing that can separate us from the God who loves us, and desires good for us and for all creation.

Where is God? Our world desperately needs to hear and see a living response to that question. Friends, let's show the world. God is right here – at work in you and me, through you and me. Amen.