

## V Epiphany-2009

“The trivial round, the common task,/will furnish all we ought to ask;/room to deny ourselves;  
a road/to bring us daily nearer God.”

It's part of human nature, I've come to believe, that everyone wants something special, something out of the ordinary. That fact was borne home to me some years ago when, after meeting with a couple to renew their wedding vows, they asked me for a blessing. Dutifully, I made the Sign of the Cross over them, and pronounced what seemed to be the appropriate words. “But Father,” they said, “We'd hoped for a special blessing.” “A special blessing,” I thought, not having a clue as to what in the world they were talking about: I guess I'd cut class the day they did special blessings in priest school because all of this was news to me. Not willing to seem incompetent, though, I decided to soldier on. So, I wound up, and took another pitch, making the blessing a bit longer, with more personal bits. Even before I'd finished, however, I could see the look of disappointment rising in their faces: Either Father was withholding the “special blessing,” or else he just didn't know what he was doing. Just as I was resigned to failure, having once again blotted my copybook, a light bulb went off in my head, and I ended the blessing by saying, “Bis mil'ab wal ibn wa ruh l qudus el ahil wahid. Amen.” They just beamed. Now I knew that the key to special blessings was to do them in a language folks didn't understand, in this case Arabic. They went on their merry way: I went home and made a stiff drink to steady my nerves.

While, in one of God's more ironic twists, I'm currently battling shingles while we consider this passage, I think it has implications for us that go well beyond dermatology. Any of us who ever have been frustrated because things didn't seem quite special enough can appreciate the story of Naaman the Syrian that we just heard read. Like so many passages from the Old Testament, the characters are all too human. Naaman, a famous Syrian general had some kind of skin disease, and so, a young Israelite slave girl, who'd been carried off as a captive on a raid, suggested that the prophet in Samaria, Elisha, could cure him. The king of Syria, wanting to help his general, told him, “Go to Israel and see if this cure works,” and to make sure that he was well received, sent along presents and a letter of introduction to the king of Israel.

The Israelite king, however, goes into a panic at the news. “O woe is me,” he says, “the mighty king of Syria knows that I can’t cure anyone and is just trying to pick a fight with me so that he has an excuse to invade my country. I’m being set up and there’s nothing I can do.” And at that, he tears his clothes, a dramatic gesture of mourning.

Enter Elisha the prophet. “Just chill out,” he says to the king, “and let me handle this.” So when Naaman arrives, he’s sent to Elisha’s house and the prophet greets him at the door. “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times,” Elisha says, “and you’ll be cured.” Notice what happens next, though. Rather than be delighted that a cure for his skin disease was within grasp, Naaman gets angry and begins to complain. “I expected the man of God to call upon the name of the LORD his God and wave his hand over the scaly patch and I’d be cured. Instead, he sends me to wash in some insignificant river, much less grand than the rivers of Syria. Why couldn’t I just wash there and be clean?” But, angry as he is, he realizes the logic of his servants who tell him, “Look, this guy has a really good reputation for healing and we’re already here, so what’s the harm in doing what he asks?” And Naaman, muttering all the while, washes seven times in the Jordan and is healed. So delighted is he that he goes back to the prophet and proclaims exuberantly, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.”

Naaman’s basic problem is that he sees himself as big and important, someone for whom drama is a basic food group, and so, he expects that the only cure for his disease has to be high and dramatic. His sense of how God ought to act is how he would act if he were God. He almost misses out on the cure because of his need for it to be dramatic and difficult, rather than plain and commonplace, which is how God chooses to work. He isn’t interested at all in the God of the ordinary.

I sometimes wonder if that same attitude isn’t easy for you and me to fall into. I look at a religion like Judaism, with its 613 commandments governing all aspects of human life. I look at Islam with the proscription to prayer at least five times a day, to give 10 percent across the board to charity, and a host of other demanding regulations. And, I sometimes wonder if we Christians don’t become at least a little like Naaman, blasé to our faith because its demands seem so ordinary. After all, what sort of God worthy of the name would simply ask us to care for each other, to

acknowledge our sinfulness and ask for forgiveness, to come together in a community of faith to give God praise and glory, and simply for doing that, assure us of total love and transforming grace? Is that really special enough?

And yet, my dear brothers and sisters, that's exactly what God says to you and me. Each time we come here to celebrate the Eucharist, each time we encounter God's revelation in Scripture or in all of those whose lives touch ours, each time, God simply is saying to us, "Do what I ask, draw close to me, and don't worry about high drama: I come to you as I choose, not as you do."

The call that we have, you and I, as Christian people, is to do those deceptively simple things that God asks us to do, and to be sure that God's saving love and grace will be there with us. Only in embracing the God of the Ordinary can we, like Naaman, come to true healing and abundant life; only then, can we affirm with him, "Now I, too, know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel."

"Only, O Lord, in thy dear love,/fit us for perfect rest above;/and help us, this and every day,/to live more nearly as we pray. Amen."