

Testing, a Means of God's Grace

2 King 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45

Today's tension, conflict and reconciliation between Israel and Syria are not only a current issue. Even before 3000 years ago, tension, conflict and reconciliation between Israel and Syria occurred. About 3000 years ago, what is now modern Syria was a great kingdom, in comparison to Israel. God gave victory to Syria. 2 King 5:1-14 tells about the relationship between the two nations. From this story we may raise a question, "Why did God help Syria, the enemy of Israel, and give them victory?"

It is remarkable that the victory of Naaman was ascribed to the good favor of the Lord, the God of Israel. The God of Israel has given victory to Syria by this man. This is a notable example how God uses people and kingdoms for a temporal means of Gods justice.

Our scripture today tells of a story about Naaman, an army commander of Syria. In the first part of the story, Naaman is described as a man who received every honor that military skill and good fortune can bring. Later in the story, he is found as a leper. In this story, a little Israelite maid takes an important role. She had been captured in a raid, and finds herself in the service of Naaman's wife. She tells her mistress of the prophet in Israel.

The king of Syria commands the king of Israel to heal Naaman. This demand causes the king of Israel great concern, until he is reminded of Elisha the prophet and his miraculous powers. Elisha bids Naaman bathe seven times in the river Jordan. Naaman refuses, but is persuaded by his attendants. The Syrian is healed and returns home with all the gifts which Elisha refuses to take.

This story gives us insight that there is hope in faith in spite of what may seem to be a situation of absolute despair. And, this story shows us that there are times of challenge and testing in our lives of faith in God. Those challenges are a means of God's grace. The story also teaches us that the grace of God cannot be purchased, not by gold or silver or expensive clothes. God's grace is a free gift, sometimes given after testing.

The "means of grace" is a theological term. There are two types of understanding of the means of grace in Christian churches: one understanding is that the means of grace are sacramental (Roman Catholic); the other is that the means of grace are evangelical (Protestant). The means of grace for the Sacramental church are the seven sacraments administered by the Roman Catholic Church, liturgy and formal prayer. The sacraments, especially Eucharist, are considered extraordinary means of grace.

On the Evangelical side, most protestant churches emphasize faith in the word of God is the most important means of grace. Therefore preaching proclaiming the Word of God is considered of the most important for protestant faith.

However, Methodists hold the two sides equally. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, emphasized Christian practices such as fasting, prayer, and devotional

readings, as well as works of mercy, as the ordinary means of grace, in addition to the sacraments (including Eucharist). I would like to introduce you to another means of grace: Testing.

Being tested in one's faith by God is useful to help us to examine our obedience to God, our doubt of God's ability, and our desire of greed. Total obedience to God, apart from our pride, is needed in our faith. Sometimes, total obedience to God seems to us absurd, hard to understand in our rational minds, and it also hurts our pride. This is the obstacle to faith that Naaman confronted in our scripture reading today.

Naaman was agonized over three stumbling blocks: doubt, pride, and obedience. When he was ordered by Elisha to wash his body in the river Jordan, he refused the demand at first, but was persuaded later.

Let's talk about leprosy. Leprosy was known to the people as an incurable disease and as a sign of being cursed by God. But, it was known to be curable for the specific people whom God wanted to redeem, transform, and use. Leprosy was known as an incurable disease during Biblical times. It is known today as Hansen's disease. Most people are hesitant to get close to those who are sick with Hansen's disease. I had an experience related to people infected with Hansen's disease.

A long, long time ago in Korea, when I was a local pastor in my late twenties, I was invited to preach at a church whose members were all suffering from Hansen's disease. They were living together, running a chicken farm in an isolated place in the remote countryside. In their little region, there was a church. I dared to accept the invitation to preach at the church. I remember that the worshipping community there was on fire with faith during the service. Their faces were filled with hope of a different kind than the hope of the world. After the worship service, I stood at the door and greeted them, extending my hand to shake hands with them. Some had lost fingers, some had twisted noses, and many had no eyebrows, having been eaten away by the Hansen's disease.

On the way home, I walked a couple of miles to take a bus. And then, Suddenly, I felt an uneasiness begin to rise up in me: "What if I have contracted germs of an incurable disease on my hand from shaking hands with them?" I ran into the stream beside road and washed my hands. Right after washing my hands, I heard a voice in my heart, "You coward! Don't you have faith?" I understand those of you who may have felt some uneasiness and worry after communion service during church here, "What if I contracted germs from a piece of bread which the pastor broke during communion with ungloved hand?" I do understand that feeling.

Let's go back to the story. The cursed disease, leprosy, which Naaman, an Army commander had was not only his problem but also a problem of the Syrian King Aram. If you have any problem, don't think that is only your problem. It is also a problem of mine and of the church family as well. That is what the church is meant to be. When King Aram heard that news that there was man of God who could heal the leprosy of Naaman, he wrote a letter of recommendation to the king of Israel. "Here I am sending my

beloved Naaman, my army commander. I am asking you to do your best for him. I heard that in your country you have a prophet, who could heal leprosy. I expect my man to return cured."

At that time, an Israelite king was in a position of being ordered by the Syrian King. The unfaithful King was afraid when he read this letter. He was disturbed by it, wondering if this was a hidden trick to invade his country. But the story of the scripture also tells something of how important it is to be humble in order to receive God's grace.

There are many people to whom and occasions on which God wanted to give His grace, and to blessed people and use them way by of a testing of their faith. There is much evidence in the Bible of God's use of testing of the faith of his chosen ones.

Abraham was tested by God's order of him to "offer your favorite son, Isaac, as sacrificial offering."

A poor widow who has one son and no food except one meal was tested by Elijah when he said to her, "Let me eat your meal first, and then share what's leftover between you."

Joseph was tested by temptation to choose evil. But he chose the good.

There are some real obstacles to overcome if we are to be transformed as people. While temptation is the primary weapon to destroy the people of God, a test of faith is a means of the grace of God for the people of God.

The Israelites were led to the desert by God before entering the Promised Land. And there they had wandered for forty years because God wanted know whether they would keep His commands or not. God led them in the desert for forty years to humble and test them. God's purpose was not to destroy them, but the testing was a blessing, a way of ascertaining their obedience to God.

Testing is not always easy. It sometimes continues for a period of time. For Jesus, it lasted for forty days, as he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The number forty is a Biblical number, a symbol meaning "as long as it takes." So, sometimes the testing lasted for forty weeks in the Bible, like when Noah prepared an ark for the flood. There was forty days of rain until the earth was totally destroyed. Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wilderness for the preparing His ministry. Are there forty months recorded in the Bible as a time of testing? For three years and six months (forty months in sum) God brought upon the land a terrible drought in the story of Elijah.

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. After that, he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. Three and half years are forty two months. Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees and prayed. After prayed, he told his servant, "Go and up and look toward sea." "There is nothing sir," the servant reported. Seven times Elijah prayed in the same way the same prayer. The seventh time, the servant reported, "A cloud as small

as a man's hand is rising from the sea." And as they waited the sky grew black with cloud, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on the land.

I tested my wife, Sun, when she told me that she was healed during the period of Lent one year. We used to have early morning-prayer times every day, except Sunday, during Lent. Every morning at 6:00 A.M., we read scriptures together and I preached for fifteen minutes, and then we prayed together for about forty minutes. About fifteen years ago, before Lent, Sun and I had a terrible a car accident on interstate 70 near West Vail.

There were four people in our car when we were caught in a snow storm. I was the driver, and our car became completely sandwiched between two semi trucks which collided into each other in a multi-car pile up. The care was totaled, but it seemed that nobody was visibly hurt by the accident.

But, a few weeks later, Sun told me that she had pain on her back so she visited a chiropractor for weeks. However, the pain was not relieved. Meanwhile, the Lenten season started. Sun decided not to visit the chiropractor during Lent and to pray for her healing. One morning after morning prayers, Sun told me that she definitely felt her pain vanish while she was praying.

Can you guess what my response was to her? "If you're sure that you are healed let's go to a test." She agreed and so I took her to the mountains for hiking. She and I had a good time of hiking. Since I tested her, I had to pay the price for that. I took her to a nice restaurant afterward.

We are in an economic crisis in the United States. Where is the answer for that? Today we could listen to God's word through the prophet Malachi's mouth:

"I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since, the time of your forefathers, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, 'How are we to return?' 'Will a man rob God?' Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings.' 'You are under a curse - the whole nation of you - because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty,

We have got to take care of the poor. That is the will of God. This is a challenging word of God to the United States economy. Should we wait for a bigger disaster than we have today before we return to God?

Trust the Bible! There you will find God's way and God's Word. Don't let the world confuse you or deceive you or mislead you. Put your confidence in the Bible!

There's no doubt about it: If we are to be faithful, effective Christians, we must cultivate an attitude of perseverance. If you want to "finish the race," don't ever give up.

Don't give up on your commitment, don't give up on love, don't give up on Jesus! While temptation is the primary weapon to destroy the people of God, a test of faith is a means of the grace of God for the people of God.

Give thanks to God when you meet a test of faith, be successful through the test, and receive the grace of God! Grace is like a thunder storm which passes quickly before us. When we face the test, let us take a chance, leap into the storm, and get wet with the grace of God. The test is a means of grace in ordinary life. God is waiting for us to offer His grace when we face difficult times.

There are so many good beginnings and poor endings. Because of give up, the good beginnings often end poorly. The Lenten season of forty days is a time of testing your faith. In this Lenten season, may God's grace, grace upon grace be with you all.