

Ambassadors for the Kingdom

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, July 4, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. Gracious God, your word has come to dwell in our hearts and shape our lives.

Continue to speak to us, O Lord, for your word is a creating word, recreating us in your image. And so this morning help us to hear what it is you most want us to hear in this time of worship. Help us to receive what it is you most offer to us. And as we receive the gift of your word as it comes to us in so many different forms this morning, we pray that our fellowship will be deepened with you and with one another and our witness to your kingdom will be strengthened in Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

Sermon:

This week I was back and forth with whether to have the reading from the Old Testament as well as the reading from the Gospel. They do complement each other in our lectionary readings this week. And so when the bulletin went to print I had at that point said. "Oh, I'll just stick with the Gospel reading." But, as the weekend has approached and as I pondered it, I've decided I'd like to begin our sermon by sharing the Old Testament reading. You will recall that the Gospel reading speaks about Jesus commissioning seventy of his followers to go out, almost like missionaries, and to speak and act the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

And so this Old Testament reading is a story from the prophet Elisha. Comes from the 2 Kings in the Old Testament and it's the first 14 verses of chapter 5 – 2 Kings 5:1-14. Continue to hear God's word.

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord God had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his

leprosy.”⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord, the king, just what the girl from the land of Israel had said to him.⁵ And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” Naaman went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I, the king of Aram, have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.”⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”⁸ But 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.¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”¹¹ But 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!¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, 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.¹³ But 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’?”¹⁴ So Naaman 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.

I think the point of both of these readings is that God cannot save and restore humanity alone. God needs human beings to serve as ambassadors for the kingdom; those who are willing to risk everything to get the word out that the kingdom of God is not some far away fantasy world but it is here and now; it is near. Without the prophet Elisha the commander of the army of Aram, Naaman, would have never been cured of his leprosy.

Elisha did not cure Naaman; he provided the instructions from God so that God could cure his leprosy. Without the faithfulness of the 70 that Jesus sent out as witnesses and ambassadors for the kingdom, many would have never heard and known that God even cared; let alone that God was near.

God, the creator of all that is and the king of the universe, holds all things in heaven and earth together. This same God needs us to spread the good word that God loves and cares for each one. This is an awesome task when you consider the world's population. It is no wonder that Jesus looks at his little band of followers and says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." When you consider the number of followers of Jesus scattered throughout the world today, you begin to see the insurmountable task we, as ambassadors for the kingdom of God, bear. Please allow me to demonstrate how this works and why Jesus needed 70 faithful followers to spread the news about the kingdom. And I hope that you will cooperate with me.

(The pastor enters the nave and begins to recruit six people, one at a time, from the congregation.) Daphne, I need you to come with me. (Brings her to the right side of the front.) I have some Good News to share with you about a savior. God is near. And I want you to just stand right over here. You're one of my witnesses; your one of God's witnesses to this wonderful news. But just stay right here. I'm going to get some more to join you. Ok? Be patient. (Pastor goes into the congregation seeking another.)

Jim, you just look like a willing witness for Christ. Please come and follow and I'll tell you stories that'll curl what's left of your hair. (The pastor leads Jim to the front of the church.) I'm just going to ask you to stand with Daphne up here cause I got a few more folks to get. But you two just sort of talk with each other and get to know each other; I need to get a couple more.

(Pastor goes into the congregation again.) Oh, I have a very willing witness here. Man, gee, I guess you're ready to follow. Go, go, go, go! (As witness runs to the front. Meanwhile, pastor gathers another witness.) Come on, let's go Denzel. You just look like you're ready to work for the Kingdom. Come on up. Great. I want to introduce you to some really nice people.

Now, it's taken me a little bit of time to get four people up here. If Jesus just kept doing this by himself, he wouldn't have been able to reach as many people as he needed to. He needed to reach the people of the world. And so, I'm going to commission the four of you to each find a witness for the Kingdom. And I'm going to just keep doing my thing. (Pastor moves to the left side of the front.) So you just go right ahead. And bring them right up here where you stand. (The four disperse into the congregation seeking others to be followers of the Word, while the pastor continues to seek followers, also.) Come on, my friend. I know you're going to be a witness for Christ. And I want to just tell you stories about Jesus. You just stand right here. (On the left side, while the first four have found others, and they, along with the new people, continue to find more. As this is going on you hear laughter from the congregation at what is happening with all the people.) Yeah, that's good, good. Oh. Gee!

You guys get over there (to right side of church) you're not on this side. I didn't get you. Desmond, you didn't find a witness yet? Come on, bring him up. Bring that big guy up, come on, Desmond or Denzel – I'm so sorry.

Alright, I want you to see something. It worked a little faster than what I had anticipated, but it worked. All the time it took me to get one person, look at that – four became, what do you have there? 10, 12? Alright, each one of you go out and get one more. (To his witness on the left side) you stay right here, I'm going to get some more. (Everyone disperses to get another witness except the person standing on the left side of the church.) Anton, I want you to join me. I got a mission for you. Come on up and stand with us. You two on the other side - (They were on the left instead of the right hand side.) And I notice they're women, Carl; that side, you're over there (the pastor directing traffic.) Alright, this isn't half-time.

(Facing the people on the right side), I want you to see that I bear the same message that the original four that I brought forward bore to you. But look, if each one becomes involved how much more effective it can be than if just one person is doing it. If Jesus did not enlist the 70, word would've not have gotten out as quickly or as effectively. It would've been just Jesus going from town to town and he had other things to do for us, for all of humanity. And so he left the

witnessing and the work up to us. And eventually, if I would catch on to it, I'd send these two out (on the left side of the church) so that we would have as many people on this side as well.

But that's why Jesus commissioned 70 to get word out. Cause it can get out more effectively and can reach more people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. (To those in the front of the church) – I appreciate all of you for participating and if you can return to your seats I'll try and finish the sermon. Maybe this was the sermon. (Congregants return to their seats and the pastor returns to the pulpit.) Robin, for the web site I actually have the instructions written out so maybe they'll get it when they read it. I don't know. It's such a dramatic visual. (Really?)

Maybe by now you understand that we are the message of God's saving grace, we're the ones; we bear that message in our very being, in who we are with our words and with our actions – with just our presence in a situation. Oftentimes people say to me, "What do you say to a family that is grieving for the loss of a loved one?" And there's really nothing you can say to take that pain and that loss away, but you can be present. And your presence, because you are there commissioned by the God of heaven and earth, your presence in and of itself becomes a witness to the nearness of God. We are commissioned by virtue of our baptism to take the message of God's saving grace, God's deep, deep all-embracing love of humanity and to bring it to the world - to the places where we live, where we work, where we play, where we shop.

Denzel, I think that was so great when you got your dad up here because witnessing begins at home; it begins with the ones you love and whose lives are directly connected with yours – family and close friends. In Church Council we've been talking about how do we get our church to grow. If that's what you've hired me for you can see that it will take a long time for that to happen. But if we engage in it together as a family and we each one of us seek to bring someone new into this fellowship to draw near to the table of Grace; to draw near to the symbols of our faith as a reminder that the kingdom is here, it is near. How much more effectively will that message get out? And how many more people will come to hear of the love that God has for them?

We are the ones who bear the message of salvation. We are commissioned by our savior just as those 70 were commissioned to go out and to spread the word that God loves all of us; that God is near, not far off. Come and journey with us as we learn about the wondrous love of God. What a wonderful message to give to your friends; a message that could very well be a life-saving message for someone who is struggling in life.

I share the Elisha story with you because this message is not just for people in the Christian family. The commander of the army from Aram was an enemy of Israel. And the message that Naaman brought, that little letter that he brought from his king to the king of Israel was almost grounds for war. The king of Israel immediately became defensive with that letter. But the prophet, the one that God had given God's vision to, saw an opportunity for God. And so he looked at his king, the king of Israel, and he said, "Why are you rendering your clothes? Why are you getting ready for war when all you need do is send this man to me and he will know that the Kingdom of God is near because there is a prophet in Israel?" So this Gentile commander of an enemy army that had already taken captive an Israelite, a young girl from Israel, who pointed him to Elisha, this man came to the prophet of God, an Israelite, and through his instructions and following those instructions and bathing himself in the muddy Jordan River, that really is not nearly as beautiful as the rivers of Damascus; was cleansed of his leprosy by God.

You can only imagine how the commander of that army upon returning said to his king, "We can't have war with these people. We must live in peace with these people;" and how the world would be transformed if the grace of God that has touched us begins to touch the people of this world around us, as we boldly go forth as witnesses, ambassadors for the Kingdom. May God strengthen us for this journey; may God use us that indeed those who meet us will know the Kingdom of God has come near.

Thanks be to God, Amen.