

Epiphany 3

Jan. 25, 2009

Matthew 8:1-13

“The Faith of the Centurion”

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Between Girard and Virden, IL

Rev. Keith E. GeRue, Pastor

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text for today is from the Gospel lesson in Matthew chapter 8, and the story of Naaman is II Kings chapter 5.

We have here in our two readings the stories of two men, Naaman and the Centurion. There is much that is similar between the two. They are both Gentiles. They are both in the military. They are both officers, in charge of many men. They are both very used to being in charge, and having things happen their way and no other way. And they both face a problem that is outside of their control. Naaman has leprosy; the Centurion has a servant who is dying.

Imagine what it is like for these two men. They are used to getting things done. They are used to giving orders. *They say JUMP, and the men say, how high?* That is the way their lives work. Yet now here they sit, out of control. They are unable to solve the problems before them. And these aren't just your usual, run-of-the-mill problems. These are life and death problems. These are problems which they face because they are unable to get out of these messes on their own.

Have you been there? Have you ever had a stage in your life where things are sailing along great and you feel like you have everything under control? Then something happens: a death, unforeseen debt, family or marital problems or even worse. These things can sneak up on you in a way that frankly is very disconcerting. They can slap you right in the face and say to you *you're not in control!* That is the Law, or more accurately, the result of the fall into sin hitting you. In this fallen world, things just don't work the way that you want them to work. They don't. No amount of positive attitude or visioning or even plain hard work can change that fact. You are not in control of your life. At least not nearly as much as you think you are.

This is what these two men, Naaman and the Centurion, faced. But their reactions are completely different. *How are they different?* One of them reacts in faith in the healing Word of God, and the other responds in unbelief at how God works in the world.

For Naaman, it just drove him bonkers to think that God would use water from the dirty, smelly Jordan river to wash away his leprosy and make him clean. God *cannot* work that way! He just can't. *Why not the water from our own rivers in Syria?* But God hadn't promised to cleanse him of leprosy from those rivers; He promised, through Elisha, to cleanse Naaman of leprosy using the waters of the Jordan and no other. That was the promise of God, take it or leave it. Initially, Naaman left it. he rejected God's promise of healing. His own pride just couldn't handle the truth of the Word of God given by Elisha to him. But after careful teaching, and patient begging on the part of his own slaves, Naaman relented and was led into the Jordan, and low and behold, he was made clean, his skin was like a brand new baby's skin.

It took Naaman a while to get there, but by the patience and persistence of the Word of God, he came to trust in the Word of God given in the water. It didn't make sense on the surface. It was just ordinary water. But because God's promise was attached to it, it was no longer just water, but a life giving water, full of grace and every blessing by God.

Now our Centurion, he actually got there quite a bit faster than Naaman. He recognized first of all his inability to help his servant, but even more than that, he recognized that there was another One who could heal his servant, Jesus Christ. Even though the Centurion, in the eyes of the world, should have been in a much better position to help his sick servant, he knew that Jesus was the one who could heal diseases, for he is God in the flesh. In simple terms, the Centurion had faith. He trusted that if Jesus would say the word, it would be enough. His servant would be healed.

Faith trusts the Word of God in whatever that Word claims. The power of faith does not lie in the one believing, but in where you place your trust. If you were to trust in the goodness and righteousness of President Obama or any of the former Presidents, no amount of faith on your part would save you. You can hope for the best all you want, but it wouldn't happen. All of these men are the same, "They are all Sinners and cannot save you." But if your faith points to Jesus Christ, then you will never be disappointed.

This is what St. Paul is talking about in our Epistle when he quotes Hosea who says **the Just shall live by faith**. Living by faith means continually putting your trust in the right place, Jesus Christ the righteous one who forgives your sins. Only God can give you the faith of the Centurion. Only God can bring that about, for it clearly is not in you to have that kind of a faith.

But God does bring it about. He gives you faith by His Word and Sacraments. What looks like ordinary water is in fact the very life giving water of life, because of God's Word and command. What looks like simple bread and wine is in fact the very body and blood of Jesus Christ, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. And what sounds like simple words, *I forgive you*, are in fact the very words by which God forgives your sins, creates and sustains faith in you for life.

We each face challenges and trials every day to the faith. You look at your checkbook and you are tempted to believe that God will not provide for you. You worry and stress about your job, your family, your friends, even church can sometimes be a source of unbelief. But God promises to you this day and every day, **I will never leave you nor forsake you**. That's His

promise, pure and simple. In many ways, that is what the season of Epiphany is all about. When Jesus took on our flesh and blood, He entered into our lives in a way that no pagan good or good luck program ever could. He entered into your life for good by Baptism. You are His child, a part of His family. It is true, and it will never change.

Believe it, for it is true. Believe it, for that is what God in His Word promises to you. *He who spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?* That is the power of the Gospel which St. Paul tells us about so beautifully. That is the power of your salvation, through His Word and Spirit alone. Believe it for Jesus' sake. Amen.