



# First Baptist Pulpit

Sermon Publication of First Baptist Church

Preached by Pastor David Saylor

## Waldo Jr.

### 2 Kings 5

What we are doing in this series

So far...

1. *God Great Desire* - "Creation of Adam" - Bible is very clear that God is very close
2. Where's *Waldo* - must bridge from physical to spiritual realm
3. *The Greatest Moment* - Barriers to being close (sin, ...)
4. *A Beautiful Mind* - God is ready to enter our every day, every minute thoughts to speak to us.
5. *Spiritual Pathways* (last two Sunday Nights) - because he wired us differently, we will experience Him through different spiritual pathways.

Today I want to show you from the Bible another way that God speaks to us on a regular basis, and if we're not careful we will miss it completely.

The Bible is a record of how God speaks to people. **One of the ways he speaks in "in person."**

Isaiah cried out to God one day, "*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!*" (Isa. 64:1). And one day, in the town of Bethlehem, God did come down, up close and personal.

Many people didn't recognize him as God, of course. They were looking for someone a little flashier. They expected more in the way of special effects, not someone who would take on all our limitations. He came as "Waldo" -- many people saw him, but

only a few recognized him. Those who missed him did not generally do so out of a lack of knowledge. What blinded them was pride.

#### I. WALDO JUNIOR - JOHN 16:5-7

Now, remember we're talking about when and how God speaks "in person." Here's the amazing thing. When it was time for Jesus to leave earth, Jesus said that his friends were lucky, because then the Holy Spirit could come and form a new community.

**John 16:5-7** "Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. **But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.**"

Although his bodily presence was leaving the earth, **a new community would become Jesus' new body**— "the body of Christ" — through which his presence would get extended.

Because of this, the writers the New Testament say things about God being present in people that take our breath away when we really think about them:

- Matt. 18:20. "*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*"
- Matt. 25:40 "*...whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*"
- When Saul-alias-Paul was busy terrorizing and imprisoning Jesus' followers, he was intercepted by Jesus' asking him, "*Why do you persecute me?*" (Acts 9:4) Of course, Jesus had already ascended to heaven by this time. Saul was persecuting men and women—members of the church. But apparently Jesus identifies so closely with his people that when they suffer, he

suffers. What Saul did to the church he was doing to Jesus.

Initially Jesus was present on earth through the body that was conceived in Mary's womb. But after the ascension he became present on earth through another Body—the community of his followers. It's as if there were a *second incarnation*. **The church is, in a sense, “Waldo Junior.”**

And sometimes it is even harder to recognize God's presence in the second Waldo than it was in the first one. Amen? But the Bible is crystal clear -- God has incarnated himself again. He is present to us through people. When it comes to people, it is perhaps supremely true: *God is closer than you think*.

## II. THE CASE OF NAAMAN

In Scripture we see that God often mediates his presence and sends his messages through people.

- He confronted David through the prophet Nathan: "Thou art the man!"
- He blessed Joseph and Mary through an old man named Simeon.
- He gave advice to Moses through his father-in-law.

### Naaman - 2 Kings 5

But one of the classic examples of God speaking repeatedly to someone through people involves a man named Naaman. So let's look at his struggle to hear the message God sent to him through some unlikely people.

Naaman was a military man. He had risen in the ranks to become commander of the army of Aram (which we know as Syria) (verse 1). That kind of advancement does not happen by accident. Over the years Naaman had distinguished himself as a master strategist. If there was a hill that had to be taken, a battle that had to be won, Naaman would figure out how to do it.

He was also savvy enough to master the political infighting among other generals so as to emerge as the top dog. We're told in v. 2 that he was "a great man" in the sight of his master the king and was highly regarded.

We read about Naaman at a high point of his life. He has just defeated the armies of the Israelites

and killed their king. He returns home to Aram with unlimited influence, national fame immense wealth, and unrivaled power.

But he comes back with one other thing: a little patch of discolored skin on his body. This was irony. Naaman can control troops. He holds the life and death of thousands in his hand. He can plan, endure, buy, bribe, or intimidate his way through anything.

Except this. This little patch of discolored skin is a memo from reality. Reality says that he is a lump of clay walking around on two legs and can't even guarantee his next breath. He had never counted on this.

Actor Clint Eastwood once put it like this: "A man's gotta know his limitations."

Today leprosy can be treated, but in the ancient world the first sign of leprosy was regarded as a death sentence. There is nothing Naaman can do. All his brains, courage, wealth, power, and connections are useless. He's going to die.

### GOD SPEAKS THROUGH A SLAVE GIRL

But God intervenes. He does it through the most unlikely source: a slave girl that Naaman brought back with him from Israel.

The slave girl has been dragged away from home, from her mother and father, the people she knows and loves. She has lost all her dreams of marriage and children and home and a life of her own. If Naaman is at the top of the pecking order, she—a female, a slave, a prisoner-of-war — is at the bottom. And Naaman is the man who puts her there.

But God is going to use her to save him. The life of this all-powerful general rests in the hands of an oppressed slave. She tells Mrs. Naaman, "There is a way. Among my people there is a man named Elisha. He has power from God. He can heal Naaman."

Imagine Naaman's response. Elisha is an Israelite. Israel is the country Naaman has just clobbered. He has just killed their king and who knows how many of their people. For Naaman to go there would be like a Al-Quida terrorist looking for medical help in Tel Aviv.

Moreover, it's a slave girl who's telling him what to do. He's not used to taking direction from slave girls. But what else is he going to do? He's

desperate. He humbles himself. He does what she says.

He explains his situation to his boss, the king of Aram. The king says, "Okay. I'll write a letter to the king of Israel. It will have to be the new king, since you've killed the old one. (Are you sure this is a good idea, Naaman?)"

The king of Aram doesn't have a clue about how to proceed; he knows nothing of God. He just assumes kings are always in control, so the king of Israel must have control of this magic power to heal. And to butter him up, Naaman takes along 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothing for the king.

Now Naaman has hope again. He's got connections—he can use his networks to save his life. He's got wealth—he can use his money to buy back his life.

The king of Israel gets the letter and is not happy about this. He is a corrupt and cowardly king, as was his father. He completely misinterprets this: "The king of Aram is asking me to cure a soldier of leprosy? This is a set-up. Just a pretext to come after me."

All he's thinking about is himself. (One can't help but notice that God doesn't speak much through the VIPs in this story.)

The king tears his robes, an indication of great anguish. In those days, when kings tore their robes—people got very nervous. Word of this event begins to spread. It gets to Elisha. He tells the king to send Naaman to him.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, and according to the Bible, it's a pretty impressive motorcade. Horses, chariots, tanks, helicopters—the same horses and chariots that had just helped him kill Israeli soldiers.

Naaman waits for Elisha to come running out of the house. He thinks, "This will be the pinnacle of Elisha's career—that he gets to heal me. This will go to the top of his resume."

#### GOD SPEAKS THROUGH AN INTERN

Elisha is in the house, sitting in his Lazy Boy listening to praise music. He doesn't even get out of his chair; instead, he sends out an intern. Naaman, who is used to everyone running to him, is going to hear from God in unexpected ways.

The intern says, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

This is God's message for Naaman, but pride blinds him (remember what caused people to miss Jesus was?). Wash in the Jordan, he thinks to himself. This must be some kind of a joke. Who does this Elisha think he is? I thought this would be a major production. He'd come out in person and wave his hands around and pray with a big southern accent—I've seen how this is done on television. I'm a man of great deeds. I'm prepared to do great things for this God—fight his battles, defeat his enemies, present him with great gifts. And now some intern tells me to wash in the Jordan River?

Naaman doesn't stop there. His belittling goes beyond God and Elisha: Now he disses the River Jordan! "Aren't the rivers in my own country better than this muddy little creek?"

"So he turned and went off in a rage," the Bible says. He is offended. The last place he expected to find God was in the Jordan River. He hasn't been treated like a great man at all. He's going to die. But at least his pride's intact.

#### GOD SPEAKS THROUGH A SERVANT

So God reaches out to Naaman one last time. His servants huddle together: "Who's going to talk to him?" Once more in this story God's message comes from a humble spokesman. One of his servants draws the short straw and approaches Naaman nervously (calling him "my father") and states his case.

"If God had asked you to do some great thing," the servant says, "you would do it. But that's not what God asks. So why not obey God when he asks you to do something small?"

Who knows how long Naaman stands there? On one side are all these years of pride and self-sufficiency and strong-willed achievement and stubborn independence. On the other side is this message, which comes to him from those he least expects. God is with Naaman, even though Naaman has done nothing to deserve it. But he doesn't give Naaman a burning bush or a choir of angels. He speaks to him through a slave girl, a prophet's intern, and a lowly servant. God sends his message through people:

So Naaman goes down to the river. The great general strips off his armor, plunges into the water like a child, splashes up and down seven times. And there he meets God. He says to Elisha in v. 15: *"Now I know there is no God but this God, the God of Israel."*

### WASHING IN THE JORDAN

Let's let "washing in the Jordan" stand for all our mundane, non-glamorous interactions with people in our lives: going to work, going to meetings, reading to a child, listening to a cranky in-law, chatting with a neighbor, checking out at the store. "Washing in the Jordan" is how we spend most of life.

1. **How well do I do looking for God's presence and listening for his messages in the people who were created in his image?**
2. **How well do I do looking for God's presence and listening for his messages in Christ's second "body" the church.** Jesus is present in his church. When people take his presence there seriously, God moves.

Psychologist Henry Cloud tells about a time in his life when he was wrestling with depression. He asked God for healing. He was hoping for something spectacular, something instantaneous and showy. He thought healing could be something strictly between him and God.

Instead, God sent some people to him. He got into a little community of people who loved and cared for him. Over time, their support and truthfulness were used for his healing. There was nothing glamorous about it. God had told him to go wash in the Jordan.

Reflecting on it afterward, Henry said he realized that he had thought the "special effects" route was God's "Plan A" and that people were "Plan B." To be healed with a bolt of lightning or some magic words is spectacular; *people seem so ordinary. But he realized that with God it is the other way around.* The only thing in God's creation created in his image is people. **People are God's "Plan A," because they alone carry his image.**

### GOD'S PREFERRED DWELLING PLACE

And as the account of Naaman shows, this doesn't mean that God is particularly present in people whom our society regards as "special": the wealthy and beautiful and strong. To the contrary, Jesus often chooses the plain, the poor, and the ordinary. They are often the preferred dwelling place of God—in them, we may meet God."

Mother Teresa once told those working with her, to be especially tender when they dealt with the poorest of the poor; when they dealt with the dying and the abandoned on

the streets of Calcutta. "When you touch them," she said, "there you touch **Jesus in disguise.**"

Jesus is all around you and me "in disguise."

I think of Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats in Matt. 25, which is at its heart a kind of "Waldo" parable.

- The King thanks one group of people and condemns another, based on whether or not they gave him food when he was hungry, something to drink when he was thirsty, clothes when he was ragged, and so on. In both cases the people reply in response, *"When did we ever see you in such condition?"* And the King says, *"Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* God is closer than you think.

Of all creation, only people are bearers of the image of God. So people have the capacity to be the carriers of his presence like nothing else.

We take long trips to see marvels like the Grand Canyon. Engaged couples plan far ahead so that they can honeymoon at Hawaii.

But if our eyes could see clearly, if our hearts were working right, we would fall to the ground in amazement at the sight of a single human being. They are the miracles. They are the God-carriers.

So your **assignment for this week** is to look and listen for God in each person whom you see.

- Spend your day looking for "Jesus in disguise."
- When you run into a difficult person, hear Jesus saying, **"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."**
- When you see someone you love, allow God to love you through them.
- When someone confronts you, ask God if perhaps he is speaking through them.
- When you see a stranger, remember Jesus may be speaking to you through him/her.
- Oh, and don't forget, the next time you go into a church, remember to hold your breath in wonder. What you gaze on is not just a group of people singing songs or listening to a message. It is God's body on earth. Where two or three of them gather in his name, he is there too. It's Waldo Junior.