

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship
July 3, 2022
Rev. YoungMin Kim

The Assignment That We Face
2 Kings 5:1-14

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Starting my first day of the 6th year in Nokesville UMC, I am standing before you again as your pastor. First of all, I give thanks to God for His grace, mercy, and blessings upon our congregation during the past year. I admit that without these things, I could not stand before you. I also thank our church leaders who have shown their leadership and served our church members. Due to their dedication and service, we can preserve our faith life in the name of Nokesville UMC as a community. And most of all, I sincerely appreciate all of our church families who have waited patiently, supported church leaders' decisions, and actively participated in church life with worship and service. Your dedication still inspires me, makes me humble, and reminds me of my calling to God and to His people and of service to you. But we are all faced with an important assignment for this conference year. It is to revitalize our congregation—that has shrunk—in our passion, in worship, and in mission. Take a look around. We have many friends in faith whom we have not seen since the pandemic broke out. For this, I will do my best, so let us work together, every single one of you, to revitalize our congregation for this conference year.

Today's passage is a story about the healing of Commander Naaman in the kingdom of Aram. He was not a man who feared God. Nevertheless, the Bible includes his healing story. Why is he so important? Let us find out his significance and apply it to us who start another conference year with the given assignment.

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After Israel was divided into Southern Judah and Northern Israel, the kingdom of Israel was a series of disobedient acts toward God. From the first to the last, kings and the people in Israel turned away from God and worshiped Baal and other gods. However, God kept giving them opportunities to repent of their wrongdoings and to return to God. One of God's ways was to use Israel's neighboring nations. The nation adjacent to the kingdom of Israel was the kingdom of Aram, today's Syria.

There had been countless conflicts between the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Aram. And the conflicts were derived from the time after the Israelites, who wandered in the wilderness, settled in the promised land and established the monarchy. King Saul won a victory against a city state in the kingdom of Aram (1 Samuel 14:47). King David also defeated many city states in the kingdom (2 Samuel 10:1-18). Up to that point, the kingdom of Aram was not to be compared with Israel because God was with Israel. But Israel was divided after King Solomon died, and the situation completely changed. The divided kingdoms, especially the kingdom of Israel, came to be overpowered by the kingdom of Aram. The reason was very simple. It seemed the kingdom's power became weakened, but more precisely, God did not stand for the kingdom of Israel, but the kingdom of Aram as verse one in today's passage said: "the Lord had given victory to Aram." As a result, Aram frequently harassed the kingdom of Israel by invading and plundering. With this understanding, let us jump into today's passage.

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In the center of the great military power in the kingdom of Aram, there was a commander, named Naaman. He was a great man and in high favor with his kings because had led them to victory upon victory against the kingdom of Israel. With the king's favor, Commander Naaman must have had absolute military and political,

power in his kingdom. What is more, Naaman was a man to fear in the kingdom of Israel. Every battle led by great Israel commanders were defeated by Naaman. He must be a man of no envy inside or outside his kingdom. Nevertheless, Naaman had a secret: he suffered from leprosy, which is called Hansen's Disease today. Inside his glittering armor and helmet, his skin became melted down with much pain. For him, his military and political power was useless before his suffering.

One day, he came to listen to good news from his servant girl being captive in the kingdom of Israel. She said, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease" (2 Kings 5:3). It could have just gone in one ear and out the other. But we can assume how desperate he was. As soon as he listened, he came to the king and asked for his permission to go to Israel and meet the prophet. With the king's letter to the king of Israel, Naaman went to Samaria, the capital city of the kingdom of Israel.

The king of Israel became afraid and worried because Naaman was in front of him. And his letter made him desperate. 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 skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me" (v. 7).

But there was a man who took Naaman's visit to Israel in stride. He was the prophet Elisha, who was the successor of the prophet Elijah and whom the servant girl spoke of to his master. Elisha simply said to his king, "Let him come to me" (v. 8). And as he said, Naaman came to Elisha with his horses and chariots. What was Elisha's reaction? He sent a messenger to him saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean" (v. 10). There was no one who treated him like that. His king showed him high favor. His people esteemed him with awe. Even the king of Israel was afraid of him. But an unknown prophet disdained him? He became angry and went away. He felt the prophet despised him and his kingdom. But his servant came to Naaman and said, "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?'" (v. 13). He accepted his servant's opinion, went down, and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan.

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Commander Naaman was a man who had gained great achievements in battles. He achieved most of them by his abilities. His king's favor, his people's esteem, and the Israelite king's fear must have strengthened his confidence. But there was one thing that he could not do by his abilities—heal himself from leprosy, his skin disease. Before his suffering, his power and achievements were useless, and with such pain and agony, we should have waited for his miserable end of his life. But he listened to good news from his servant girl. Was it possible for a master who was a great military commander in the kingdom to listen to a servant girl and move into action? He did! He got furious because of Elisha's way of treating him. He was about to turn and return to Aram. But another servant persuaded him. Was it possible for a great commander who got angry before many people but changed his mind and followed directions? He did! And as he obeyed, he became healed. God's work was fulfilled not by his abilities, but with people in faith.

Starting the new conference year with me, we stand now at an important crossroads. Passing through the pandemic, we have lost one third of our congregation. We haven't seen many adult members who actively joined with us. We haven't seen many children and youth. This is a matter not only for us, but most churches are also undergoing something similar. But this cannot be an excuse for us to sit on our hands and do nothing. If so, what will happen to us in five years or ten years? If we don't turn around, we will head for death. In order to make a turnaround, please don't think that your pastor can do it by himself. It is his job. Or our lay leader or church leaders can do it by themselves. Yes, we have more responsibilities, but helping our church turn around cannot be done by someone else's effort. When we work together without exception having the same mind, the same heart, and the same consciousness of crisis, we will witness that God's work will be done in our congregation. Amen.