

“Miracles on the Margins”

Sermon by the Rev. Zack Nyein

Sunday July 7, 2019

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Scripture Readings:

[2 Kings 5:1-14](#)

[Psalm 30](#)

[Galatians 6:\(1-6\)7-16](#)

[Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)

This story from Luke is challenging for polite Episcopalians, immediately conjuring images of Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons traveling two by two with informational tracts and awkward encounters. Such zeal makes perfect fodder for irreverent Broadway musicals. But as respectable Episcopalians we tend to prefer the aquarium approach over that of harvests and vineyards. As someone once said, our method is to simply build an aquarium next to the river and pray that some of the fish will choose to jump in.

Our squeamishness is valid. Beyond mere timidity around sharing our faith, we also know that such texts have oft been distorted to justify the darker chapters of empire: wars, crusades, and every manner of military conquest — all in the name of God. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once remarked, “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”

As part of a denomination descended from the Church of England and British Empire, we cannot deny that this is part of our story, too. A legacy

that has given birth to complex dynamics of religion, power, and global relations — Calling for nothing less than unequivocal repentance for the destruction, violation, and abuse of individuals, communities, and cultures beloved by God.

The ironic conundrum is that at the same time, conquered nations and people have, in spite of their conquerers, now given birth to millions upon millions of joyful followers of Jesus, filled with the Spirit of peace and love, justice and mercy — who have gifted the church with brilliant theological minds, rich traditions of art and music, and powerful examples of saints seeking after the things of God.

It is often, in fact, precisely out of these suppressed and conquered corners of the world that the most potent prophets hail. Yes the superstar — Rosa Parks, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero, MLK— but also the faithful nameless nobodies—the backwater saints.

Just last year, the name of one nearly lost to the throws of time was resurrected by the Episcopal Church and recognized officially as a saint: Deaconess Anna Alexander from Pennick, Georgia on the coast. A lifelong, African American Episcopalian, she was born in 1865, the year the civil war ended and she had a passion for education. She was the first and only black woman to be commissioned as a deaconess — the precursor to ordained female deacons — and she lived out an audacious call to ministry, founding her own church — Good Shepherd, Pennick — and also teaching at a school in Darien, GA. Each week she commuted 40 miles by

land and boat to fulfill her duties. She forged connections with northern colleges and trade schools, and worked tirelessly to help young African Americans flourish and succeed.

Here's the kicker. Pennick, Georgia no longer has a substantial African American population. Why? Not for any predictable reason except that Deaconess Alexander was so good at her job that she kept educating children and sending them off until there literally weren't any left.

Deaconess Alexander depopulated the town!

It was a miracle from the margins.

Today we hear about another miracle on the margins, in the healing of Naaman, the Mighty Warrior. Though a high ranking commander in the Syrian militia — Naaman suffered from leprosy — rendering him a complex mix of privileged yet stigmatized. Perhaps out of desperation, or maybe out of empathy borne of his own marginalization — the text doesn't tell us, but for some reason, Naaman chose to listen to his nameless Israelite slave girl who knows about a prophet in Samaria — Elisha.

So Naaman tells his boss, the King of Aram who says he will send along a letter to his conquered foe and sparring pal, the King of Israel. A man of means, Naaman stops at the ATM and stocks his wallet for the exchange, bringing treasure upon treasure to the king's courts. But the king of Israel, deflated, suspects it a political ploy and tears his clothes, in a sign of exasperation and defeat. "Am I God, to give life or death?" He asks.

Off stage, however, the God of Israel is at work. When Elisha gets word, he summons Namaan, who soon appears at his door with horses and chariots in tow. But when Namaan is not greeted with a commensurate spectacle, his pride is insulted. After all, Elisha doesn't even answer the doorbell but sends his messengers to instruct him to wash in the **Jordan** seven times, as prescribed by the Hebrew Scriptures.

No pomp and circumstance, no magic hands, just an invitation to foreign waters, thought far inferior to the Syrian springs Naaman knew. Not to mention, it just seemed all too easy. Incessant, his anger festered until yet, once more, his heart and mind was jarred open by some other unknown, no name, nobody servants who found the gumption to approach him and suggest that he might just — give it a try. If it were something harder, you would do it, they argued. So Namaan gave it a try. And Namaan was healed.

Namaan's healing was made possible not because of his status or riches, not because he was a mighty warrior; not because he deserved it, or because he had enough faith. Naaman's healing was made possible because of his ability to listen to wisdom from the outside — even from his subordinates. He was open to receive grace from a religious tradition not his own. He was willing to wade into the foreign waters of the Jordan, a river known first and foremost as a boundary marker between his people and another and to find wholeness where they met. His healing was made possible through relationship and engagement with people who didn't

look or think or believe like him — yet through whom, God was at work. **It was a miracle on the margins.**

There's a popular saying in recovery circles and among our very own Covenant Community. "Don't leave before the miracle happens." Once in a blue moon, someone struggling with addiction is able to successfully quit cold turkey — far more often, the winding road to healing is much slower — a series of minor miracles and stumbling setbacks, wrought of tiny victories, commitment to a program, and robust community support.

This spring, All Saints' was privileged to come alongside the men of Covenant in a new way — a small but rewarding tile in the mosaic of recovery, as we hosted the latest experiment in a nationwide movement called Warrior Church.

We met for five Saturdays at the Mythos 150 gym in West Midtown, where we gathered for a workout bookended by prayer, reflection, and fellowship. Begun in 2015 by the Rev. Sean Steele an Episcopal priest in Texas, it is far more than fitness for Christ. It emerged after Rev. Sean, a veteran, began connecting with a number of fellow veterans who were deeply spiritual but found it difficult to pray in traditional settings. Nearly all of them carried trauma, and many of them found it exhausting or triggering to worship in a space where they were expected to sit still.

So, Sean started asking what it might look like to do church in a gym, where worshipers could move their bodies and spend time intentionally exercising — a deliberate pun on "exorcising" the demons of their trauma.

In researching further, Sean learned that ancient societies nearly without exception, developed indispensable rituals of reintegration for men returning from battle. He learned that villages would spend days tending wounds and cleansing warriors upon their return, in addition to praying and crying out to God in lament for the the reality of war itself and the circumstances that lead to it.

A stark contrast to the state of veteran care in the US today, in which mental trauma far too often remains stigmatized and untreated, and often leads to suicide, addiction, and homelessness.

Expanding the scope to first responders, medical professionals, social workers, and anyone who witnesses or has experienced trauma — including a large percentage of those in recovery— Warrior Church aims to create a safe space to celebrate as sacred the souls and bodies of all who have felt the weight of violence, abuse, and trauma. Which on some level, includes us all.

It was a moving experience to join with younger and older, white and black and brown, Christians and agnostics, cisgendered and trans, as we pushed on the boundaries of what church could be in a new and foreign territory for All Saints.' We closed each session with open group reflection on the Bible passage for the day, and, not surprisingly, it was mostly crickets from the Episcopalians at first. Our friends from Covenant saved the day. Accustomed to the hard work of laying down one's pride and insecurities to share with honesty and vulnerability, they were the ones to lead off our

discussions with incredible depth and insight of how God was moving in their lives. **Miracles on the margins.**

The Warrior Naaman almost left before the miracle happened. Mired in suffering and pain, anger and insult — it would have been so easy to give up, turn around, go home and deal on his own terms without the vulnerability, messiness and uncertainty of engaging across such profound layers of difference. But God had bigger plans for Naaman. Because Naaman's story isn't just about the healing of his leprosy. Naaman's story is about the healing of the world. It's a story about the God who is bringing about a whole new world through Jesus of Nazareth: the prophet on the margins — the unknown nobody from nowhere who came for anybody and everybody everywhere. It's the story that got Jesus run out of town.

Good news for the poor, sight for the blind, release for captives, freedom for the oppressed. Do you remember? This was the sermon that started it all, and the home team ate it up. Amazed at his eloquence, "Could this be *Joseph's* son, they wondered?" ...Until... he name dropped Naaman, the Syrian. And the crowds turned on a dime. For at the invocation of Naaman, they realized that this good news of God's kingdom was not just for them but for all. Somehow the sense of loss in that was too much to bear, so they told Jesus to get lost instead.

Having shaken the dust of his feet, today Jesus sends us into our city as laborers for the harvest — not for purposes conquest and conversation but to share in pursuing peace — proclaiming a kingdom of love and justice not

of this world, but closer than we may think. Jesus invites us into the hard and courageous work of engaging our neighbors in new ways, of listening to those on our margins, of stepping into unknown waters, receiving hospitality, and sharing our gifts with vulnerability and humility. Imperfectly, but faithfully. Traveling light, Jesus invites us like Naaman to lay our baggage down at the bank of the Jordan — the very margin where this world meets the next — and to join him in the healing of the nations.

Where are you mired down by the weights of the world? Where are you addicted to your own angers and frustrations this morning? May we have grace to believe that a new creation is possible even from the margins of our lives and the world. May we have grace to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time.” In other words, may we have grace not to leave before the miracle happens. **Amen.**