

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 66:10-16; Psalm 66; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-20

Introduction. In writing these Sermon Notes, our aim is always to lead the reader to a common theme and expose a nugget or two of wisdom that comes from looking at the scriptures with an eye on the Hebraic contour, which as Christians we so often miss. As we come to the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, the common theme seems elusive and the Hebraic contour hidden. But as Paul says “we must press on towards the mark” and explore together!

Common Theme. The common theme revolves around God's redeeming nature and its manifestation in unexpected places! We have a Gentile soldier coming to faith, a badly fallen King being revived, a community of followers of Jesus who stumble, and a group of disparate disciples called to proclaim the redeeming Kingdom of God from a place of weakness.

2 Kings 5:1-14. The first verse in the first reading reveals a lot. It tells us that Na'aman was an army commander in the Syrian Army – a Gentile whose name, strangely for an army commander, means “pleasantness”! He was a great man who was in favour with his master, the King of Syria. He was also in favour because the LORD (the God of Israel) had given Syria a military victory through his leadership – an unusual distinction but one which gave him fame such that he appears in this story as someone who was likely known by the original ancient audience. He is described as a man of valour but with an infectious and debilitating skin disease named as leprosy. So Na'aman is a man of contradictions – a pleasant army commander, a Gentile whom the Israelite's God had blessed in battle, and a brave and courageous man with a serious skin condition.

At some point, his wife had taken a captive Israelite girl as her servant. The girl clearly had an affinity with her master. When she sees he is suffering, she recommends that he visit the prophet Elisha in Samaria who would cure him. Na'aman seeks permission from his king and is instructed to take a very generous gift along with a recommendation letter to the King of Israel. This gives us an insight into the intricacies of relationships in the ancient world. The King of Israel seems to have an uneasy truce with the King of Syria and the request and accompanying gift lead him to suspect that there is a conspiracy afoot; after all, no one can cure leprosy, can they? He laments and tears his clothes and has a tantrum. Elisha hears of the king's distress (and apparent lack of faith) and he says, “Let Na'aman come; I'll show him there is a prophet in Israel”. Na'aman visits Elisha, but instead of being received in the way he expects and the gifts accepted, Elisha sends a messenger to his door and instructs Na'aman to take a ritual bath (as per Jewish law) but to repeat the dip seven times in the Jordan River. Insulted by Elisha's treatment, Na'aman complains that Elisha did not do the right magic and that there are better rivers in Syria than the Jordan. In other words, the treatment offered is below his station. His servants being wise made him reconsider, and on dipping in the Jordan he was healed. Elisha said, “Wash and be clean” and he was made clean. So not only does a Gentile, ritually unclean man become blessed by Israel's God in battle but, in obeying God's command as given by the prophet, he washes and is made clean. In verse 15, Na'aman proclaims the God of Israel as the only God. He becomes a believer!

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Psalm 30. This Psalm of David was written for the dedication of the Temple, which did not happen until after David's death. The first three verses particularly have an echo of the Na'aman story. David sings of military victory where God has not allowed David's enemies the luxury of triumph and rejoicing over him. David like Na'aman cried out to God for help but he was not just helped but healed. Because of his life decisions, David was destined for Sheol, the place of separation from God and torment, but God restored him to life among those not destined for that place. In the next verse, David talks of how he prospered under God but ended up relying on his own strength. God blessed him with a strong foundation, but when David misused his base God hid his face and David was "dismayed". He pleads with God (and the inference here is *negotiated*) that God may be merciful by implying that one who goes down to the pit will not be able to tell of God's faithfulness. He finishes the psalm extolling God for turning his mourning into dancing and promises to sing God's praises forever!

Galatians 6:1-16. This is the apostle Paul's letter to a group of Jesus' followers who began their faith walk well but are being led astray by false teachers that have infiltrated the Christian community in Roman Galatia. If we were to take our previous two readings as a model of what it means to be in a relationship with the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, we would conclude that what is required is first an encounter with God followed by a revelation of the Torah (Jewish law) and then a life of applying oneself to following that law. Both Na'aman and David followed this trajectory. In his letter to the Galatians Paul modifies this path. He spends the early part of the letter making clear that a relationship with God is built on faith, not on doing the right things. In chapter 3, Paul reminds the community that their salvation came as a result of a spiritual encounter with the Spirit which revealed the work of Jesus Christ. By the time we reach chapter 5, Paul has made it clear that the "additional" gospel being proclaimed by the infiltrators is false. Their injunctions to be circumcised and to follow the letter of the Law in addition to accepting Jesus are shown to be unnecessary and a deviation from the true path. Paul highlights the way in which a true believer will travel, not by the road of the old law, but by a new way – the Law of Christ. An encounter with God is still necessary as is a desire to meet God's standards as set out in the Torah, but now believers have Jesus and his teaching to guide them on the right path. Part of that process is working alongside one another encouraging (and admonishing) one another and sharing each other's burdens. Aim to do good to everyone especially our fellow travellers on The Way. Paul concludes with a personal handwritten section rather than a secretary's copy of an affirmation that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything in this new world. This is shorthand for there is neither Jew nor Gentile. There clearly were, and still are Jews and Gentiles, but their status has no bearing on their fitness for admission into the community of believers.

Luke 10:1-20. The Gospel reading shines a light on the relationship between Jesus and his close followers, not just the 12 but an extended group of 72 more. We often forget that the Jewish model of a rabbi and his disciples is not just a group of followers hanging on the rabbi's every word but a group that is being taught and motivated to spread abroad the rabbi's words of wisdom. Their given mission is to proclaim the gospel in any place where they are welcomed and hosted. They are to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near. At first, there does not seem to be a link to the previous readings, but the final few verses (vv. 16-20) are key. The returning 72 are rejoicing in the fact that "even the demons are subject to us in your name". We might say they are puffing

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themselves up. Jesus brings them back and says, *Look I've seen the head demon defeated, he is nothing. Yes, you have power over his minions, but better to rejoice that your names are written in heaven.* This harks back to Psalm 30 and, like David, building our lives on a base of humility and faith and not on the base of material foundation that God has blessed us with.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 66:10-16. The theme of redemption runs through these dramatic verses, too. We see Isaiah using Jerusalem as a metaphor for the support and comfort of God. God always uses a familiar image to illustrate his truths; Jesus used the parables of familiar life and characters to illustrate his teaching. In the time of Isaiah, Jerusalem was the home of Jewish worship, the capital of Judah, and the centre of Jewish life. It also was in a mess, badly governed and the people led astray. In a few short verses, the prophet describes Jerusalem's state and says that those who mourn over her demise will be nursed and satisfied at her breast. He quotes the Lord who says he will bring peace to her and that once more she will be like a mother carrying a child on her hip. There will be redemption for those who, as verse 2 says, "are humble and contrite in spirit and tremble at my word" – those whose relationship with him is built on faith, not a material foundation or doing works.

Psalm 66. This psalm is all about praising and thanking God for his great deeds. The first nine verses are a great song of praise extolling the name of the Lord. Verse 10 leads into an account of God's testing and trying with heavy burdens being laid and men riding over their heads and the people going through fire and water but ultimately being brought into a place of abundance. In verses 13 to 15, the writer speaks of offering bulls, goats, lambs, rams, and fattened animals as sacrifices. The psalm closes with a reiteration of God's blessing and his redemption of the writer and by extension the people. God will redeem even from the deepest iniquity if we are faithful to him. Again, Psalm 66 alludes to following the (sacrificial) law as a means to relationship with God, but by using the same New Testament readings as the RCL, we are pointed to the clear modifications made by Jesus and Paul. Redemption comes by faith alone following an encounter with God and applying the principles Jesus taught in our lives, not by following the Law. There is no requirement to become Jewish in order to follow God's new and living way.

About the author. Paul Hames became a follower of Jesus in 1979 and became pastor of an independent fellowship in Leicester, England after 17 years in procurement management in the UK gas industry. In 2000, he was appointed CMJ UK's Regional Advisor in the English Midlands. He also spent two years as Deputy Director with Prayer For Israel in the UK. Between 2005 and 2010, Paul and his wife Janey managed CMJ Israel's Christ Church Guest House, working closely with the Hebrew, English, Romanian and Arab congregations and the Heritage Centre. Since 2010, he has worked in the UK as part of CMJ's field team with special responsibility for the Bible Comes To Life Exhibition and CMJ's archive heritage, along with representation work in churches, new age outreach and leading tours to Israel with Janey. They have three grown-up children and two grandchildren.