

February 15, 2009

Text: 2 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45

Title: Painkiller

*Painkiller? Painkiller?* Believe it or not, I have been practicing the American accent very hard. You might notice that my accent is better than when I came to Central almost two years ago, although I still have a heavy Korean accent. If you have come to Central for the first time this morning and if you are here for the annual worship exchange, you do not know how bad I was. Believe me, it was bad. Why do I need to practice the American accent? It is because my lip muscles and tongue have never been used before in the way that you use them. So if I don't get used to the American accent, even when I speak something in English, you won't understand me. Or my talk will give you a wrong impression, and/or a funny feeling. For example, if I say the word, *painkiller* in the way you stress it, then you will think anesthetic. If, however, I say *painkiller*, it will bring up the strength and almost unrelated meaning of *kill*. I do not want to stress the word, *kill*. I want to say that I need to something to kill my pain.

When we have a two-word phrase, we have to either stress the first word, or the second word. If we put stress on both or neither words, it will give us a whole new impression. Let me give you another example. Imagine you learn English from a minister who is not trained to teach English and comes from Korea where the native tongue is not English. How inappropriate! But, please bear with me. When Levi Strauss first came out with his denim pants a hundred years ago—maybe longer ago than that, they were described as blue JEANS. However, now that we all agree on the image of jeans, they are BLUE jeans. So the important information is that I am wearing blue ones, not black ones, or red ones, but blue ones. However, a hundred years or so ago, it was important that I was wearing jeans, which were very trendy.

Whenever we read Scriptures and encounter a story in the text, we all have our own point that we want to put stress on. So then, what part of the two stories that we read a minute ago do we put stress on? Obviously, both stories are healing narrations. One is older than the other. There are two great figures in those stories: Elisha and Jesus, and there are two people who want to be cured from their common diseases, leprosy. As you know, both suffering people are healed by the prophet and the messiah. Okay, the message seems clear: believe our Lord, and you will be clean, too. The Lord is a painkiller, or actually a disease-killer, if you can accept this new word. I don't think emphasizing healing is wrong or anything. Yes, Jesus was a healer and exorcist. He did healings and he did exorcisms! However, I believe we should not stress only his healing ability or his exorcising. If we do so, then we easily generate a mathematical function. X is Jesus. Y is people. Result is healing. It is so mechanical. Have you asked yourself how these kinds of healings happen? Is it because where the messiah is, there is no misery? Or is it because people do something good deserving a cure from God? Let's go back to a hundred years ago and imagine that we are wearing jeans. Then, it doesn't matter if you wear blue or black jeans. It matters that you are wearing jeans. Why do you wear jeans? Nobody asks this kind of question now, but a hundred years ago people did. Why did Jesus heal people and why did the Gospel writer put it into his book? Maybe it does not matter that there are a lot of healing stories. What matters is *why* there are a lot of healing stories in our Scriptures.

Naaman, he is a great warrior and a commander of the army of a strong country. He is like a defense secretary of the US, so to speak. Israel is now a small and weak country. Probably, you need an explanation of the international situation during Elisha's times. Aram is the ancient Syria and it defeated Israel. Let's imagine that we went to another country and conquered it. How proud we would be! Yes, Naaman is the chief military commander of the great country, Aram, that has conquered many countries. But for some reason, he gets the terrible disease that the ancient Israelites call leprosy. We do not know what that illness is now. As you can imagine, they don't have detailed names of illnesses like we do now. However, one thing that is certain is that there is no one and no way to cure that disease in Aram. How do we know that fact? When the king of Aram sends a message, what is the reaction of the king of Israel? "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?" Yes, it is a disease that only God can heal. How embarrassing this situation is! Naaman lives in a relatively well-developed country. Since they defeated other countries, they have tributes from other countries every year, which means that they have money. They will maintain their prosperity for a while since usually the strongest country in the ancient Middle Eastern area becomes a center of trade. Thus, along with money, other high tech medical skills, which is a service industry, come to follow. Then now what? There is no one and no way to cure Naaman's disease even in the highly developed country. How embarrassing it is! Besides, what makes it worse is that Naaman's situation is so bad, so that he needs to listen to a young girl from the country that he conquered. But this is not it. When he arrives at Elisha's door, the prophet doesn't even come out of his house. Instead, the prophet sends out a servant to meet Naaman with a sticky 3M note (I am just kidding) saying: "Go to the River Jordan and immerse yourself seven times." Come on! Was not it enough to insult the chief commander by not coming out of his home? Now the prophet says to go to the muddy river. You know, that river is not a crystal clear beautiful river. It is muddy narrow kind of dirty river. So we might understand Naaman's complaining. At this point, he is not just embarrassed. He is angry!

In Korea, I was a person who could tell subtle differences and nuances between philosophical theories and between literatures. I majored in French philosophy and literature in college and studied the Western and Eastern philosophies in graduate school. You know, my GPA in graduate school was 4.3 out of 4.5, which means I got only A pluses and As. I was a well-educated mainstream male who was honorably discharged with a rank of army sergeant in Korea. But suddenly everything changed when I came to the United States. Sometimes I feel that I am like a kid here and that I talk like a kid. Because my English is so broken, I usually don't want to talk to people. Often, frustration paws at my ego, and embarrassment scratches my face with its red fingernails. Sometimes you don't understand what I say, and I don't understand what you say. Let me be honest with you. There was even a time when I felt my life was miserable. If you go abroad, you will understand this. Yeah, I need to practice how to properly pronounce words like *this*, *that*, *cat*, and *cow*. How embarrassing it is!

The United States of America has been a great country. Its military power is the world's best. This country has been a center of the world economy and trade for decades. While Europeans gave up becoming a center of all science for many reasons, this nation quickly took over for them and became a leader in all academic fields such as physical science, medical science, mathematics, anthropology, philosophy, literature, and so on. This is a country to which

everyone in the world is looking to immigrate. I know how you are proud of this country. However, this nation now faces a very difficult time. Some other countries blame our strong military power. Immigration rules and laws are not friendly to someone who dreams the American dream. Our health care system and social security are so broken, and many people are now suffering both their physical and financial pain. Everyone is worrying about the government's bailout program. This nation that once had a sense of community and morality is now suffering from its individualism and self-pity.

Needless to say, we are all suffering from the bad economy now. How embarrassing it is! This is the richest country in the world. But this is not the real problem that I have in my mind. The problem is that we strongly believe that once this economy bounces back, everything will be fine. Is it true? Is good economy our Elisha and economic boom the River Jordan? I know this recession makes us feel more miserable, but it is not our leprosy. Our leprosy, I think, is that we are easily buried by harsh situations.

Humiliation has shaped me during my years here in the United States. But it turns out it is a good thing. I saw God's hands through my experiences here. It was neither my good GPA, nor my ability to comprehend things in the world, nor the faculty of speech that helped me get through my difficult time. It was humiliation that brought me my salvation. When I laid down myself, that is, my boastful ego, I saw God's hands. When I quit focusing on myself, I could see God's work in the lives of people. When I saw God's face in people's faces, I could understand the reason why my eyes cannot see my face but other's. When I started to look at other's faces, I saw myself in their eyes. It was my misery that made me see God's salvation. I realized that where there is misery, there is the messiah.

In our Gospel text we read, a leper comes to Jesus. We cannot imagine how harsh his life is. It's even worse than living in the era of the Great Depression. It is worse than that. If someone has leprosy in the first century in Israel, he or she is expelled from family, friends, and all social life. Of course, he or she cannot go to worship because everyone in the first century Israel believes people get this disease because of their sin, unforgivable sin. That is why people call a leper unclean. At least, Naaman had family and friends. Even his king supported him and sent a letter to the king of Israel seeking help. He had enough money to pay the cost for his medical care. In contrast, in Jesus' time, a leper doesn't have anything except the courage to go see Jesus. This is the courage to risk his life.

Where there is misery, there is the Messiah. Again, it is not that where the Messiah is, there is no misery. Whenever we read healing stories, we have a tendency to see only the fact that Jesus can heal. "Jesus *can* heal, Jesus *can* heal." We even tend to say it as if we don't need any medicine ever, once we have Jesus. Yes, he can heal. But why does he heal? Jesus is not a painkiller that is effective on pain mechanically. So when he kills pain, there is a reason. The reason is that he loves us so much. So much! Thus he is not a mere power. He is a person. He is a person who can touch a leper who has the deadly contagious disease. He is a person who stretches out his hand and grips another's hand. That is why he can heal. He so loves people who are abandoned by society, who are dashed to the floor of depression, and who are alienated by social classes, that he can heal people and exorcise the spirit of depression.

Where is God when we feel so miserable? Scriptures tell us God is in us and among us. Do not look down despairingly at your feet. Lift your head up to see the sky. I hate to say this

cliché, but our crisis is an opportunity. Do not be discouraged by this economic situation. However, how can people see there is God among us?

When Jesus has healed a leper, Jesus gives him an interesting instruction: “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” In that period, in order for someone who is expelled from a community to reenter it, the priest’s approval is required. This approval validates his or her healing to the people in the community. This is not a mere physical healing story. What he really wants people to do is live with others as a community. Yes, Jesus cares for people’s broken relationships. He is saying not, “You are healed. Go, enjoy yourself,” but “your broken relationship is now mended. Go back to your friends and family. Live as a testimony of hope.” In fact, Jesus doesn’t care about his personal reputation at all. That is why he dismisses the leper with a strict order not to tell this to anybody. He does not want to be a magician-figure. This is because he heals out of love.

Where are Christ and Elisha? If they stay with us, we do not need to suffer from our misery. But where is the Lord? Where is the prophet? Now all that we have are healing stories. What do we do with them? Yes, they are stories, but stories of hope. Even when we feel we don’t have any chance, we know there is salvation. Now that we know the Lord wants to share our pain and heal our broken relationships, we can look up to the sky. At this moment, our Lord asks us: “Go back to your community. Try to live your relationship. Do not just say you are clean, but live out your cleanness. Live from your heart. Then people will see God’s hands on your head, God’s face in your face, and themselves in your eyes. Go back to your community and live out hope.” Let’s go to people with God’s hope. We could see a miracle. No, we *should* see healing!