

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Second Book of the Kings, commonly called the Fourth Book of the Kings.⁴

“Now Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**], captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper. And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman’s [**NAY-uh-munz**] wife. And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy. And one went in, and told his lord, saying, Thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel. And the king of Syria said, Go to, go, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel. And he departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, Now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have therewith sent Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy. And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me.

“And it was so, when Elisha the man of God had heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. But Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. Are not Abana [**ABB-uh-**

nuh] and Pharpar [**FARR-parr**], rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage. And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith [**SETH**] to thee, Wash, and be clean? Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

“And he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came, and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-sixth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“... So Jesus came again into Cana [**KAY-nuh**] of Galilee, where he made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum [**kah-PURR-nay-umm**]. When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judaea into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son: for he was at the point of death. Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. The nobleman saith [**SETH**] unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith [**SETH**] unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth. Then inquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house. This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judaea into Galilee.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: *“Jesus therefore said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.’ The official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’ The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way.”*⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

How do you believe in something you cannot see, nor touch, nor feel? By faith.

Faith is an amazing thing. St. Paul tells the Hebrews that faith is *“the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.”*⁷ Faith is the moral conviction that those things we are taught by our Lord are in fact true. We accept them without the sort of physical proof that we might require of other things. This is because of the authority we grant to the one asking us to believe.

When we are young, it is easy for us to accept things on faith, which is usually based on our unquestioned trust in our parents. So it is that as young children we believe that our parents are the most wonderful people ever to walk the face of the earth, even if it is clear to everyone else that they are not. (Of course, when we become teenagers, then for a brief period our parents become the most backward, ignorant people ever to walk the earth, but fortunately that phase doesn’t usually last much beyond the observer’s early twenties....)

When our parents tell us incredible stories of a “tooth fairy” who will, for reasons never really explained, give us money for a lost tooth, or of an “Easter Rabbit”, who leaves eggs and candy for children, we accept these tales on their face, never even questioning them. Then, of course, there is “Santa Claus.”

When we come to an age when we can no longer accept such stories without some evidence, or find out that they are simply myths, it is traumatic for some to discover that they have been misled. Others try through some metaphorical twisting of language and intent to justify the telling of the tales.

There are those who, in their loss of innocence, are so traumatized that they can never again accept anything on faith. They can no longer bring themselves to believe any or anything without some sort of scientific evidence involving mechanical measurement. Theirs is an angry and suspicious existence, filled with distrust of everyone and everything.

Perhaps this is why our Lord told His Apostles that only those who can hold faith as a child does can make it into heaven: *“Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”*⁸

Children have a clear, pure, innocent faith, uncluttered and unspoiled by the experience of life. They have not had time or sad opportunity to be hardened by the lies, the deceit and the disappointments of the world.

Adults often recollect with longing and a wistful envy that innocent approach to life. “Oh, how I wish I could be young again, and be that innocent and believing again,” is a common refrain among the weary adults who watch their children. What took our innocence away? What was it that despoiled our ability to believe?

Was it that we found that those whom we trusted ultimately proved to be fallible? Was it that we figured out that those people who we believe to be all-powerful were in fact as weak, and error-prone, and as human as we ourselves?

Our parents, at whom we once looked at in awe, we now see in the harsher light of the reality in which these people struggle to pay bills,

fight, snore and are in all respects as fallible as we are ourselves. As we come to see their potential to fail, so we come to lose faith in them.

We are not alone in our doubts and uncertainties. Even the Apostles had trouble with their faith. Thomas, called Didymus, is known today as “Doubting Thomas” because he had a hard time believing the events surrounding the Crucifixion and Resurrection when he was told of them by his fellow Apostles. When the other Apostles told him what they had seen, he could not accept their story. When they plainly told him that they had seen the resurrected Jesus, he flatly refused to believe it: *“But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will not believe.’”*⁹

He knew Jesus had been crucified. He knew that Jesus had been buried. Those things were within his world of experiences, and so he had no problem accepting them. But he had never known anyone to be returned to life from the dead after three days. This was beyond his experience, and beyond his ability to believe on faith.

Our Lord helped Thomas deal with the latter’s doubts: *“Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.’”*¹⁰

Suddenly, Thomas was confronted with an undeniable truth and, despite his earlier disbelief, was forced to believe: *“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.’”*¹¹ In other words, “Thomas, you are blessed because you believe after having seen this. But even more blessed are those who accept this on faith.”

The Nobleman, as he is called in the King James Version of today’s Gospel—the Revised Standard Version calls him “an official”—

had the same problem. He wanted to see Jesus heal his son. He probably had given up on the ability of usual physicians to heal the boy, and so he turned to the only one who might be able to help. He travelled from Capernaum [**kah-PURR-nay-umm**] to near Nazareth to ask Jesus to come and see his son. Jesus told the man that the child was healed and told him to go home.

We can only imagine how hard it was for this man to accept Jesus' word and to go home. His entire experience must have been that without direct intervention, no help could come to his child. So he started for home, and on the way he met his own servants coming to get him. When they told him that the boy was healed, he asked what time the healing had occurred. When told that the time of the healing was the same as time that he had spoken to Jesus, he could finally believe, and the Gospel tells us that he and his entire family became believers. Jesus had correctly said of him, "*Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.*" Just as he would later for Thomas, Jesus provided the help to believe that the man needed.

Why was it so hard for that official, and for Thomas, and for many others, to believe what Jesus told them? It is because they have been failed so many times before. It is the same reason a child loses that in-born wide-eyed wonder at his or her parents and comes to regard them instead with the more mature eyes of a fallible human being who knows others are also fallible. But there is one who does not fail us in any way.

Whatever question we have, He has an answer. Whatever pain we suffer, He can offer comfort. Whatever trouble we face, He can help us overcome. While we might long like Thomas to see our Lord in the person, to hear His voice, see His face, and share His experiences, we know that He does not fail us, even if we do not have his physical presence with us.

This is why we can look to Him always in time of trouble. We can accept without fear of error or loss whatever He says. We can hold fast to His assurances. We can depend on Him with faith and that is all the evidence we need.

Let us pray.

Eternal Father, we depend on You for all our lives. In times of joy and of tribulation, we know that we can turn always to You for comfort, support, guidance and grace. Keep us always mindful of Your perfect presence in our lives and Your constant assurance. This we ask in Jesus' Holy Name. Amen.

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The Rev. Mr. Larry Wagoner, MSW¹²
October 28, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity, 2012.*

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ *II Kings 5:1-15a (KJV).*

⁵ *St. John 4:46b-end (KJV).*

⁶ *St. John 4:48-50 (RSV).*

⁷ *Hebrews 11:1 (RSV).*

⁸ *St. Mark 10:14b-15 (RSV).*

⁹ *St. John 20:25 (RSV).*

¹⁰ *St. John 20:26-27 (RSV).*

¹¹ *St. John 20:28-29 (RSV).*

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