

12 February 2006  
Epiphany 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Come and Die”

Text: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Syria. Today that would probably mean he was a four-star General. He was a commander of men. A warrior, brave and fearless. Someone who was used to holding life and death in his hands. He gave the orders, and they were carried out. He was the star of the victory parades and enjoyed the spoils of war. Naaman, we might say, had it all.

Until one day, Naaman was struck down by an enemy he could do nothing about. No, not leprosy – the God of Israel. The God of the people he was fighting against now struck back – *but not to kill Naaman, but to save him*. For that’s what this God, our God, does: He loves His enemies, prays for them, and wants to save them, even when it means laying down His own life on the cross. And little did Naaman – the mighty, fearless warrior – know how hard this fight would be. It would be his hardest battle yet. For to win this battle, he would have to lay down his weapons, his pride, his power, and let God fight for him. If Naaman tried to win, he would lose. If he dies to himself, then he wins.

So how hard did it get for Naaman? He has to take advice from little girls and servants, visit a socially inferior prophet who offends him by not even coming out of his house to meet him, and then do *not* something heroic and spectacular, but simply wash in the Jordan. Take off his ornate clothes, his uniform, the symbols of his high status and position, and wash like all the commoners in the Jordan. And not just once, but seven times. . . . Well, it was too much for Naaman! His pride fought back. He was angry and insulted! Until his eyes locked once again upon his rotting flesh; the death sentence living in his body. The commander of the army of Syria was simply no match for the commander of the Heavenly Host! The army of angels. Die now, Naaman, or die later. Die now to yourself and be saved, or save yourself and your pride and be condemned.

Finally the Word of the Lord does its work. He is crushed. He fights no more, but enters

the water . . . once, twice, seven times. And he is clean. But not just clean, **“his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child.”** He is reborn; recreated, both on the outside, *and* on the inside. So that he can say (in the verse right after where the Old Testament reading ended!): **“Behold, I know there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.”** He believes. And there is peace. (v. 19)

It’s a good story, isn’t it? But the truth is, there’s a little Naaman in each of us. A little Naaman that needs to be crushed. A little Naaman that likes the victory parades and the pats on the back and the admiration of people. That thinks pretty highly of my own powers and abilities, my dedication and devotion, my strong faith and knowledge! We may not be a four-star General in God’s army, but a least . . . what? A trusted officer, no doubt! A major, maybe a colonel? . . . And we can’t even see it, can we? That *we* have the same false god as Naaman! **The false god named *me*.** And we like to worship at that altar, don’t we? Giving ourselves exactly what we want – credit and praise. Boosting our pride and our egos. Thinking that we’re something – we’re *good* Christians! – and that there’s *something* in us that separates us from the rest. From those *out there*.

Little Naamans. It’s true, isn’t it? Take a closer look. Our hearts are not clean. We do not love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves. Our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires want to serve only me. Do you see your rotting flesh? The death sentence of sin living in your body? You are struck down by an enemy you can do nothing about – the sin of Adam. And the sin you then add to that. It is a fight you cannot win. An enemy too powerful for you. If you try to win, you will lose. The only way to win is to die. To die to yourself, and let the Lord fight for you.

And to fight for you is exactly why the Lord has come. And for the Lord to fight for you is exactly why you have come to the Lord, here, today. Coming to the Lord in repentance; crushed by the truth and the Law; seeing our filthy, rotting flesh and the leprosy of sin living in us, and falling before the Lord. And with nothing to claim for ourselves, with no reason in us why God should care anything about us, we simply cry out like our leprous brother in the Holy Gospel: **“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”** And our Saviour, who comes not to kill but to save, says, **“I will, be clean.”** And at His Word, we are clean. But not just clean; more than clean! We are reborn; recreated. So that we can rise to a new life and say, *I believe*.

It happened thus also to St. Paul – then known as Saul of Tarsus, four-star General in the Jewish army of Pharisees Against Christ, and persecutor of Christians far and wide. Paul

too was one day struck down by the God of Israel – the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus Himself – *not to kill him, but to save him*. And how hard for Paul – who had the right pedigree, the right training and knowledge, and was zealous beyond all his brothers! If anyone could have run the race to Heaven and won, it would have been Paul. . . . And yet what did Paul write? **“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?”** Only one receives the prize. And Paul now knew who that One was. The One who came and ran the race for us! For Naaman, for you and me, and for all people. The One who was born *without* the sin of Adam. The One who loved perfectly – not only the loveable, but also the lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. The One who kept all the Law perfectly, in every point, no matter how small. The One who fought for us on the cross, by shedding His blood and laying down his life for us. The One who burst the bonds of the grave, and **finished the race** in His ascension into Heaven. The One who as the God-man now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, with everything under His feet. The One to whom was given all authority in Heaven and on earth. The One to whom every knee will bow. He is the victor.

But the victory He won was a victory He did not need. As the Son of God everything was already His. And so He came in human flesh to win the victory for all human flesh. That dying and rising in Him, His victory would be our victory. And so when St. Paul encourages us to **“run that we may obtain the prize,”** this is what he means. That we would not try to run to Heaven ourselves, **but run to Christ**. And run to Him not in Heaven, but to where He has come down now, to be with us, to be for us. To run like Naaman, to the New Jordan River of Holy Baptism, where we are washed clean of our sin and reborn, recreated. To every day lay down our pride and power, and die and rise with Christ to a new life. And then to run like the leper, to the Words of Christ in Holy Absolution, where He lays His hand upon our heads and proclaims that we are clean, our sins forgiven. To every day lay down our pride and power, and die and rise with Christ to a new life. And then to run like St. Paul, to the Altar of the Lord, to trust the race not to our flesh and blood, but to His flesh and blood, which He gives us to eat and to drink. To lay down our pride and power, and die and rise with Christ to a new life.

It’s hard to do those things. To know yourself as you really are, and to place your life – your *eternal* life – in the hands of another. But when you know yourself as you really are; when your eyes lock onto the leprosy of your sin and the blackness of your heart; once you are so crushed, you know there is no other way. We were disqualified before the race even began! If we are to win the victory, there is only one way. The way of Naaman, the way of St. Paul, and the way of all Christians. To die to yourself, and let Christ fight for you, and win for you. For it is the very thing He has come to do.

And then live like it! Live as the victor that you are in Him! Not worried about crossing the finish line to Heaven, but knowing that in Christ, *you already have*. If He is there, then you are there. The race we run now is so that all may be there with us. That His victory, our victory, may also be their victory. Jesus once told that leper that He healed not to say anything, but now to us He says say *everything*, to *everyone*, in every *place*. Until Heaven is full (as if it could ever be!) and the victory banquet is served. The marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom. Where we will take our place at the Table with Naaman, Paul, lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Just as we do here at *this* table. They're here too, part of the "*angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven.*" The whole company of Heaven who died to self, and won in Christ. So we too. Come and die. The victory is yours.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.