

A Sermon for Epiphany 6, Year B
2 Kings 5:1-15 – February 12, 2006
Fr. Jim Cook

Keeping our faith simple.

Today's reading from the Old Testament is the story of a man named Naaman, "commander of the army of the king of Aram." Naaman has leprosy, a disease which, if left untreated, can become very debilitating. One day, Naaman learns that there is a prophet in Samaria (a city in northern Israel), named Elisha, who can heal him. So Naaman goes to Samaria to find the man. When Naaman arrives at the prophet's house, Elisha sends out a message that Naaman should wash in the river seven times, and he will be healed. But Naaman expected more: incantations, gesticulations, drama. He is not satisfied with simple washing instructions.

Naaman is not so different from many of us. It is a human tendency, I think, to believe that things which are complex, or hard to understand, are more likely to be correct, and therefore authoritative. In the complexity of life, simple answers can often seem wrong.

Last Friday, I was in court, providing testimony for the prosecution at a pre-trial hearing in a case against the man who broke into this church last summer. It was a crime I witnessed. This was the second hearing I had to attend. At the first hearing, in December, I was the only witness. On Friday, however, there were two other witnesses who followed me. As I was waiting to be called to the stand, I worried about whether my testimony would agree with that provided by the other witnesses. As I waited, I began to feel nervous, and started rehearsing in my mind what I would say in court. But this provided me no comfort, so I finally resolved to keep things simple, and to tell the truth as best as I could remember it. And it worked!

As it is in matters of jurisprudence, so it is in matters of faith, that simpler is better. I recently had the chance to put this principle into practice. Erin Sullivan, who is ten years old, presented me with a number of questions. Even though they were simple questions, they could have generated complicated and complex answers. And I had to remind myself who I was talking to and keep my answers not only truthful but simple.

One of the questions was: "Who was first, Adam and Eve or the dinosaurs?" I could have answered in great detail describing how the creation stories were written, and how the fossil record fit into the scheme of things. Instead, I simply said this: The dinosaurs were first! The creation stories in Genesis describe tell how God populated the earth with plants and animals and birds and reptiles and fish *before* he got around to creating humans. And because the Bible often paints pictures with large brush strokes, the little details, like where dinosaurs fit in, are left to our imagination, and our faith.

Simple is better. In fact, there is a principle of logic, dating to the fourteenth century, called Occam's Razor, which says if you have two possible solutions to the same problem, the simplest answer is usually the correct answer.

Jesus agreed with this principle. Think about it: God gave the Israelites ten commandments. But, over time, the religious leaders thought it helpful to increase the number of laws to well over six hundred. (A quantity that Jesus would later describe as a burden hard to bear.) By Jesus' time, however, religious scholars could agree that the hundreds of laws could be condensed down to two: love God, love your neighbor. And Jesus was even able to cut *that* number in half: Love one another as I have loved you.

Keeping things simple is not only better, it can still bring us to the truth. Even though Naaman, was looking for an elaborate solution to the problem of his leprosy, he was finally persuaded to give the simple solution a chance. So he washed seven times in the Jordan river, and he was healed. As a result, Naaman became convinced of the reality and power of God.

Years ago a friend who led a Bible study asked me to provide him with a quote from a prominent 20th century theologian about a certain issue of faith. I provided him with the quote, and when he read it he became quite angry because the paragraph was so complex and convoluted that it was almost impossible to understand. When it comes to talking about our faith, and explaining it, to friends, sometimes, it doesn't need to be any more complicated than simply saying "I believe ..."