

“The Lord: Our God Beyond Boundaries” based on 2 Kings 5:1-19a, Jeremiah 29-14, Luke 17:11-19

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 12, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Our readings today are two of my favorite passages from the Old Testament. In the first, which Marlene read for us, Jeremiah is writing to the exiles in Babylon. In this letter, he gives them a word that comes directly from the Lord. The letter tells them to settle in and live life as they would in Jerusalem. The Lord says to seek the “shalom” of the city.

This word is typically translated as peace, but it’s more than that. The Lord is asking them to seek the city’s “wholeness.” They are to seek what’s best for Babylon. What’s best for the place that they’ve been sent in exile is what is best for God’s people there.

Our second reading about an Aramean general is from a few hundred years before Jeremiah. The Arameans were enemies of Israel, conducting raids of Israel’s territory. That is how a young girl becomes enslaved to Naaman, that Aramean General. Just a few years before this story, Arameans had killed Israel’s King Ahab. Scripture interprets this as the justice of the Lord against Ahab.

But for Jehoram, Ahab’s son and the current king of Israel, the Arameans are a threat. They are his sworn enemy. This is why the king is afraid to meet with the general. Yet, when Elisha the prophet hears this, he asks to meet with Naaman. Elisha heals the general, by the power of the Lord.

In each of these stories, we see the will of the Lord being revealed in love for enemies. In each of these stories, we see that the Lord has no limits. In each of these stories, we see the Lord’s perspective as being greater than our own. In each of these stories, the Lord our God goes beyond our boundaries.

For the people in exile, they believe they have been taken far, far away from the Lord their God. The temple, for them, is the meeting place of heaven and earth. It’s the place where the Lord lives with them. In Babylon, they are far from Jerusalem. In their minds, they are now far from the presence of their God. Yet, through Jeremiah, the Lord tells them how to worship in this new land.

The Lord tells them that now, to worship or serve their God, they’re called to seek the well-being or wholeness of Babylon. They’re told to build houses and remain there. In that time, this meant building a livelihood as well, whether with a family business or a farm. So, the Lord says also to plant gardens, to cultivate the earth there.

Then the Lord tells them to grow their families for several generations – to increase there. The people taken to Babylon were largely the ruling class, the educated, the cultural elite, and the connected. Here in Babylon, they have no power, it’s a totally different culture, and they are cut off from all the connections they had.

The Lord does not tell them to grab power. The Lord doesn’t tell them to change the culture. The Lord doesn’t tell them to network. No, the Lord tells them to settle in and be regular ordinary people for Babylon’s sake. Intercede for Babylon to the Lord, for in Babylon’s *shalom*, or wholeness, you find your *shalom*, or wholeness. Pray to me on behalf of your enemies – This is the Lord’s command.

Then the Lord gives a warning – Do not be deceived by the prophets divining in your midst. You see, Jeremiah was unpopular. He told the people the truth about their exile. He told the truth about the sins of Israel. He said the things they didn't want to hear. He spoke from God. Then there were other prophets whom God did not send, and they were very popular. They said, "We're going to take power back! We're going to defeat Babylon and their culture! We are going to have our status back!" As you might expect, they were very, very popular.

But God said these are the dreams you want to dream. They're not God's considerations. They're not God's plans. They're dreams of control, when God asks them to be humble. I get it, they were scared. I'd be scared too. In this world today, we can feel like we're in exile and it can be scary. But the Lord promises better. The Lord promises to be with us in it. The Lord asks us to be humble and to love. That's the harder way.

The story of Naaman foreshadows Jeremiah's request from the Lord to the Judeans in exile. You see, it is an Israelite girl who was taken from her home and enslaved in Naaman's house and she's the one who seeks the wholeness of Naaman. She seeks for him to be free of his skin disease.

Now, we often think of Hansen's disease, a leprosy where limbs fall off, but there's nothing in the Ancient Near East texts or the bible that describes leprosy in that way. Nor is there any proof that Hansen's disease existed in that part of the world at that time. What is described though is something we would probably label as eczema, psoriasis, and other conditions. The reason these made you unclean and seemed so horrible is because they put on your living skin things that look like a corpse. Whether it's the ashen look on skin or sores that resemble a diseased body and the start of decay. People were seen as having death already on them while still alive.

She would have seen her captor as someone for whom death was looming. She might have been happy about that, but instead she offered help. The King of Aram took a risk in sending his top general into the enemy territory of Israel. Was this a trap (set by the girl somehow)?

But if Naaman's body was becoming a corpse while alive, perhaps he saw that it was worth the risk to send him to Israel's king. For Jehoram, who also would have been wondering if it was a trap, saw this unclean man coming to him. Was just a rouse to make him ritually unclean? Or worse, was it to sacrifice a dying general to kill a king? You can see why Jehoram tore his clothing, which was a sign of grief, fear, or indignation. These are appropriate feelings.

Elisha does not meet with Naaman either. Instead, he sends a messenger to the general. But he offers a simple task to cure his skin disease – Go and wash in the Jordan River. Naaman's pride nearly gets in the way because he sees Aram as superior to Israel in every way. But his servants set him straight – If it was difficult, you'd do it. Why not this?

And so, the text says he immersed, or baptized, himself seven times. Of course, when we hear Jordan River, we think baptism because that's where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. But this immersion, this baptism, is not for the forgiveness of sins. It's not like Mason's baptism today to show the mark of the Holy Spirit and welcome him into a new community. Yet for Naaman, his immersion results in his skin being healed, and he humbly submits to the Lord. Naaman wants to thank the Lord by giving the prophet of the Lord a substantial gift. Then, in a move that sounds probably pretty strange to us, we get one of the best parts of the story.

Elisha refuses the gift, so Naaman then asks for two mule loads of soil. To us it seems like he is saying, "You won't take my gift, so you must give me a gift." But Naaman's gift was never really meant for Elisha. His gift was for the Lord. He might give it to a prophet, but it was for the Lord whom he sees now as the only true God. Therefore, if Israel's God is the only true God, he needs to be in Israel, on Israel's soil, in order to worship Israel's God – the Lord.

Beloved, this may still sound strange to our ears, but in the Ancient Near East, the gods were considered tethered to a particular land, having authority in that land and that land alone. Baal Haddad, who the writer of Kings mocks by calling Rimmon, or pomegranate – as if to say to the Arameans that we're going to call your god, "Pomegranate." Baal Haddad was the storm god, who ruled over the Levant, the Syria-Palestine region. But when the Israelites were led to freedom from Egypt by the Lord, the Lord led them into Canaan and Philistia, which when latinized becomes the word Palestine.

This was Baal's territory, but Israel, the people, belonged to the Lord. If the Lord was to rule over the people of Israel in this land, then Baal had to go. That is why there is such an emphasis from God about getting rid of Baal worship. But Naaman is ready to cast aside his god, which is a huge contrast to Jehoram and his parents Ahab and Jezebel, who led Israel to worshiping Baal. They did so even though Ahab and Jehoram were Israelites, ruling over Israel, and belonged to the Lord.

Naaman recognizes Aram's god, Baal Haddad, has no power over Israel's land. Naaman wants to extend Israel God's territory to his home in Aram. He wants to make a place to thank the Lord in his own homeland. He wants two loads of soil to put down in his house.

Then he tries to make a couple of exceptions because he knows his King is going to make him go into Baal's temple, or the house of Rimmon. Here he is either saying that, "When I'm on Baal's turf, I need the Lord to understand I've got to do this because I work for this king." Or he's giving a "wink," saying, "When I'm in that temple worshiping, I'm really worshiping you." Either way, Elisha gives his blessing, saying, "Go in peace." And so, Naaman is a changed man, inside and out.

Beloved, the idea of a god bound by their temple to a specific land is strange to us. This is because Jesus, is the Lord and he has rightfully claimed authority over the whole world. Go to every nation, he told the disciples. This is actually one of the more overlooked parts of the good news, or gospel. It's the point that the Lord who called Abraham's descendants to be a light to all nations, a blessing for all nations, it was so that all nations would come to worship the Lord as their God.

This happens in Jesus. The Lord their God decides "I'm going to come as one of Abraham's descendants. I'm going to be that light to the nations. I'm going to be a blessing to all. I'm going to bring all to worship me as one people."

This is why God, the Father, the Lord over Israel, sent the eternal Son, one with him, to be the Lord our God in our flesh. He took on the limits of our human flesh and by his life, he revealed the fullness of our human vocation. By his death, being hanged shamefully on a Roman cross by our human sin, and by his resurrection, defeating sin and death once and for all, he ascended to his throne. He brought humanity up to God, enthroned as our king. He sent the Holy Spirit to live in and among us.

Beloved, in Christ, the one true God, joined all of humanity to God in Jesus. Thereby, the Lord defeated every false god, overcame every boundary, and he is the one reigning over the world alone. This is the good news we celebrated in Mason's baptism this morning. In this sacrament, the water of this world becomes a sign of God's grace in Jesus. This reveals God's love for him in a new way, designating him officially, as a citizen of the Kingdom of God in and through Christ's church.

Beloved, from the beginning humanity and the powers of this world have tried to limit God. We limit God in how we treat others. We limit God in the ways we expect God to look with favor on the things that might come easy for us, and with disdain for the things that might be difficult for others. But alas, once again, if scripture doesn't challenge you, if it doesn't make you think, or convict you in some way, you're probably not reading it right.

So, here in these stories we see God revealing a love that goes beyond. In the gospel reading that we used for the Call to Worship, Jesus heals 10 with skin disease – 10 considered to be walking dead – and only one comes back to thank him. Jesus didn't go and return the skin disease to the others. Luke doesn't tell us that. The presumption is they were healed even though they weren't thankful. Yet, it's the outsider, the Samaritan or foreigner who comes back.

Beloved, the love of God goes beyond any limits we put on it – real or imagined – and extends to you, no matter who you are, what you've done, or where you've come from. What's more, and this is the hard part, that love extends to your enemies – the people you can't stand and who you just wish would shut up – God loves them too. God loves this nation, and God loves every nation.

So then, let us be like Naaman in accepting this love and humbling ourselves. Let us be like the exiles and seek the welfare or wholeness or peace of our community around us – every single person in it. Let us seek that wholeness because that will be our wholeness. Let us then, in doing this, worship God not just in this building but with our whole life. Amen.