

II KINGS 5:1-14 or ISAIAH 66:10-14

PSALM 30 or PSALM 66:1-9

GALATIANS 6:1-6), 7-16

LUKE 10:1-11, 16-20

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 3, 2022; Year C

### ***Know When to Say When!***

**“Say when!” I am not quite sure how widespread this phrase is, but in the South, it is a ubiquitous colloquialism heard in a variety of contexts. When being served a heaping helping of your favorite dish or being poured your favorite beverage, some lemonade or iced tea, you will inevitably and invariably be asked to “say when” when you think you have enough on your plate or in your glass. As I read today’s lections while preparing for this sermon, it occurred to me that these texts are all about knowing when to say when, when knowing when enough is enough, when deciding that it is time to fish or cut bait, to do your business or get off the proverbial pot! You all know the real language associated with that frequently used phrase! I confess that today’s overloaded stream of consciousness is kind of literary potpourri trying desperately not to masquerade as a sermon. In the hope of becoming a sermon, today’s lections offer a creative intersection, a cross pollination, of some disjointed and disconnected ideas! My goal is to hopefully connect some dots! Might as well confess! Might as well tell it all and admit it! Way back in the day I inherited a fundamentalist Associate Pastor in my first parish who was absolutely mortified that the church chose to call me, a young, freshly minted, raw and green, not long out of seminary clergy in training, rather than call him as an experienced blowhard who literally scared the hell out of joggers by grabbing them by the arm as they ran past the church on their daily routes. He was nicknamed John the Baptist in the neighborhood. Anytime we recommended a new initiative, that**

inevitably and invariably, was something to which he was opposed, he would attempt to thwart said initiative by piously saying to the gathered group, “I think we should hold off on this idea and pray about it!” It was a great tactic, defer and deflect, disguising his disdain with a pastoral piety masquerading as some kind of perfumed and sanitized spirituality. His attempts never succeeded because everyone saw right through the hypocrisy of the ruse. The group had reached consensus and it was now decision time. Everyone knew it! Motions were made, seconded, and thankfully, approved, moving the marble of the congregation toward a better day and a bright future! Sometimes it is just time to act. **The preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes knew the dynamics associated with any urgency of action all too well, reciting his profound litany declaring that there is a time and a season for everything. The writer then gives some wonderfully transparent examples, usually invoking opposites, the polarities of a given situation. For us persons of faith knowing when to say when is always a matter of, a combination of, our time, Chronos, as important as it is, and Kairos, God’s always more important time!**

**Today we begin our homiletical journey with the wonderful story of Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, a man considered great because of his victories fought in service to his liege. Well, it turns out that Naaman, as all of us human types do, had an Achilles, his own thorn in the flesh! Actually, it was his flesh! Evidently, Naaman was suffering from an incurable skin disease, most probably leprosy, a horrible ailment, an affliction that literally caused the skin to fall off the bone as if it had been slow cooked like barbecue pork on a hot Fourth of July grill! I knew I would find a way to somehow get the holiday into this sermon! It was gross! Nasty stuff! Those who suffered this illness had to out themselves in public, clearly letting those around them know of their condition because it was extremely contagious. Think of the way we have had to learn to navigate COVID in that regard! Well, it just so happened that these**

**Arameans had taken captive from Israel a young girl who was now forced to bow and scrape at the feet of Naaman's wife as an indentured servant. In whatever casual conversation was taking place, the servant girl made an innocent, offhand, comment, that "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease!" Well evidently Naaman overheard these erstwhile comments and reported these reports to the king who quickly prepared a letter to the king of Israel along with some cash and prizes, the usual kinds of gifts befitting royalty: ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. Obviously, the king thought very highly of his loyal and faithful army commander! Well, the paranoid king of Israel thought the whole thing to be a ruse, that he was being set up in some elaborate scheme to incite, to instigate, some kind of conflict. But somehow, in the mystery of all that was transpiring, Elisha caught wind of the letter and Naaman's problematic predicament and sought to be a voice of reason, obviously sensing some sincerity in these mystical musings. Elisha, in typical prophetically dramatic or dramatically prophetic fashion, sent a message to the now troubled king as he pondered his dilemma and his next move, Elisha inquiring of Israel's king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel!" This line strangely reminded me from one of the lines of the Ghostbusters song, "I ain't afraid of no ghost!" Elisha had no fear of this worthy or unworthy adversary! No, Elisha, ever thinking outside the proverbial box and whatever comfort zones confined the king, saw this as an evangelistic moment, a missionary enterprise, a perchance opportunity to persuade, to convince or convert, some heathen Arameans. And every opportunity is an opportunity! Time to be a witness! Time to know when to say when! And we are just getting started with our story.**

**So, we are told that "Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house." Elisha immediately disses**

his visitor, this VIP, his special guest, failing any hospitable test demanded in this customary Near Eastern practice by sending out a messenger with one simple, concise, message, the prophet not even bothering to see in person this man representing the man suffering from a serious bout of rotting flesh. “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean!” Wow! Well, that was easy enough! Go take a dip in the Jordan and repeat seven times. Uh, no! How dare you give a warrior, a commander of an army, such a pathetically pitiful, such a menial task, such a pedestrian assignment! This is so beneath my station! The Jordan sucks when compared to our local rivers! “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” No! And to use some popular speak, wait, what! Yes, that is exactly what you need to do, the perfect way to win friends and influence people, blatantly insult their places, especially their holy ones. I mean, after all, the Jordan River would one day be good enough to host Jesus’ baptism! Some people will always ignore or turn down the best advice! The biblical writer tells us that Naaman went away in a rage! Come to think about it, not only did Naaman insult Israel’s bubbling and babbling pride and joy in his dissing of the Jordan, but he vicariously insulted the prophet Elisha in the process, the very person, the only person, who could be his healing salve, his Balm in Gilead, a prophet uniquely qualified with the gifts to bring Naaman his desperately sought relief. I sense some therapeutic issues with Naaman here, but they will have to wait, for now! It is important to remember that, while Elisha may have been God’s prophet, Elijah’s number one protégé, he was not much of a chip off the old block in my opinion, except when he was! They both oversaw the slaughter of folks in the name of God Elisha suffered some of the same ills as Naaman, and we are not talking about any physical affliction. Elisha simply put was not a very nice person. He was highly sensitive and insensitive, a tad paranoid perhaps, certainly judgmental, and vindictive. Once, when some children, forty-two to be

exact—let me emphasize children for affect here—were making fun of the prophet’s bald as a cue ball head, calling out to him, “Go away bald head, go away!” Having his fragile honor as a religious sort deeply offended and enraged, Elisha called out two she bears from the woods that came to his defense, mauling the little ones in the name of the Lord! (II Kings 2:23-25) And the biblical writer gives Elisha a pass, defending his actions as do many non-critically thinking biblical commentators today! Nothing like a mamma bear on a mission! How nice! **So, knowing Elisha’s propensity, do you really think that he really cared whether Naaman would take his not-so-subtle advice? Naaman, it is up to you baby! It is your call, your circus, your illness! Anyone who would have the temerity to have innocent children slaughtered in the name of his God because they were behaving like children is not going to suffer adult or semi-adult idiots and fools, including the likes of pompous military leaders. Here it is! Take it or leave it! When is when! Enough is enough!** Do not look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when you have been led to the water and refuse to drink, uh, dunk! And do not beat a dead one! Enough horsing around! **But despite Naaman’s recalcitrance and reluctance, his servants, undeterred in their mission to get him well, while exhibiting an impassioned and ultimate fealty to their psychotically inclined leader, yes men who seem far more receptive and intuitive than their master, begged, implored, the stubborn and stupid commander to reconsider his proudly rooted but over the top ridiculous position. Somehow, they got through to him as they provided a quick thinking and logical rationale. Their hopes were finally realized in getting through Naaman’s thick skull. Plot twist! All their efforts eventually paid rich dividends for them and for their superior officer! Reluctantly Naaman finally went down into the Jordan and did as Elisha instructed, repeating and rinsing the commanded seven times, as the prophet had so clearly directed, so clearly led, giving commands to Naaman’s spokesperson from the safe distance of his house. The commander of the Aramean army, in a most transcendent moment,**

**was magically and miraculously made clean, healed on the spot, cured of his flesh-eating monster, his flesh purportedly restored like that of a young boy! I guess you could say that Naaman finally came clean! I could not resist that one!**

**Several things strike me as I once again read the unfolding plot in this narrative from II Kings. The first thing is the reminder that no man, that no one, is an island. We are all interdependent! We need each other, no matter our status, lofty or not! Even the most isolated among us, the most reclusive or introverted, need human contact, human interaction, the gift of interpersonal relationships. All of us need a hand up on occasion, a little help, some sage advice, sometimes requiring action. No matter how great and powerful, how strong and mighty, how good we think we've got it, we are all frail and fragile individuals whose fortunes can become misfortunes in a matter of a moment in time. Naaman is a classic example of someone who thought he was above it all, that because of who he was, relying on his stellar reputation, he could and would handle every need, would conquer every foe, human and/or otherwise. In battle, I can quickly assume that Naaman would be quick to take credit for victory, lauding the prowess of his own leadership, to take a bow rather than promoting the accomplishments of those around him, forgetting as an egregious oversight the warriors in his care and under his command, the troops on the ground who did the heavy lifting, who waged the decisive battles. Naaman could always pull himself up by his bootstraps! He needed no help, until he did! Naaman is a posterchild, the very definition, of arrogance, hubris, and narcissism, full of a false sense of self-centered self-importance, this army commander embodying fully each nuance of these never flattering, never complementary, adjectives. Naaman thought he could walk on water while turning it into wine, no humility in his personal or professional DNA! To my knowledge only one person, a certain unnamed rabbi, is reported to have done these kinds of things and he remained unfazed,**

**unimpressed, exhibiting traits commensurate with someone who was portrayed as the humblest human being imaginable! If you can do it, it ain't bragging, but in all honesty, you do not need to call attention to your self-evident exploits if they are obvious to everyone as that grand and amazingly wonderful. All human beings carry within their being a certain level of vulnerability whether they choose to acknowledge it, to own it or not! All of us are compromised to some degree, subject to the worst of nature or other people, no matter how faithful or not we may be! Naaman had lost touch with his own reality about the very nature of who we human beings are created to be, even as divinely imaged as we all are, bragging rights implied and explicitly on display!**

**As we ponder our freedoms, the liberty that is our legacy, as American citizens, living the dream as best we can, we desperately need the reminder that all of it can evaporate in a nanosecond, that if we take it for granted it can and will be taken away from us. The challenge to preaching in this or any reputable pulpit is to name this ever-present danger without being political, and it is a fine line to walk, a tap dance that is virtually, practically, and realistically impossible. Let me go on record acknowledging that no matter which side of the aisle any of us find ourselves in relations to Supreme Court rulings, we must sadly admit that any and all decisions made are politically motivated and reflect personal biases, agendas, and beliefs, and have little if nothing to do with the Constitution. This system is broken, and we are being systemically broken right along with it because we have been rendered as societal pawns, nothing more than mere collateral damage, simply being dragged along for the ride, being taken for a ride, hijacked in the process or the lack thereof. No matter anyone's view on these extremely difficult and controversial issues, when freedom of conscience and life, when liberty and its pursuit is not the watchword and human beings, and yes, let us acknowledge that we are talking Roe vs. Wade and women's rights here, all of them now**

required to submit their bodies to the whims of government, to mostly tired and grumpy old, white men—myself included—we have a problem. My hunch is that this will not come as a shock to any of you, but I am not a woman. Therefore, I cannot imagine what it is like to walk in their shoes for even a moment. It is their bodies, no matter any opinions on the matter! For many this weekend, celebrating our country and its independence is difficult to impossible. It is hard to shout, “let freedom ring,” when freedom is not ringing and when there is so much handwringing! I look at history and cannot help but recall the evils of so many despots through the centuries, those throughout history who have ruled with an iron fist, and unfortunately those who continue to control in the present. I am reminded of the Neros and Caligulas who almost single-handedly brought down the great Roman Empire, a seemingly invincible and impenetrable juggernaut that dominated the time during and after Jesus. None of us will ever forget the reign of terror of Adolph Hitler, the scourge of Nazism lowlighted by the evil of the Holocaust. We now see a reincarnation of Hitler’s hideous motives, a reconstitution of his evil, in the invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin, whose windmill fighting escapades have been unleashed in a vain attempt to return Russia to its former imaginary Soviet glory have cost thousands their lives. We think of Mussolini, Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro, Aleksandr Lukashenko, Putin’s brown nosing, boot licking lackey in Belarus. Yes, they are legion and always will be, or so we think. We all ask ourselves how one individual can possibly affect such atrocity and sway so many naïve and ignorantly impressionable dolts? And, yes, now we even have one of our own of whom to chaff and complain! And then we ask how in the name of independence how one individual could ever persuade a rabid following of sycophants to lead an insurrection, a seditionist so delusional he thought he could pull it off? Yes, he thought he could get away with it, with overthrowing the American government with absolute impunity. He thought he could orchestrate, that he could choreograph, such an audaciously repulsive stunt! The televised



hearings we have watched as witnesses over the last couple of weeks are unbelievable except that they are not! Yes, it only takes one!

In the Witness from the Gospels in Luke today we read the story of Jesus sending ahead of him seventy-two missionary emissaries to every town and place where he himself intended to visit. These early evangelists were to take nothing with them on the journey, trusting that they would be honored guests in the good will of local citizenry who would gladly serve as their gracious hosts, respectfully and obediently exercising the long held and time-honored traditional practices commensurate with the ancient custom of hospitality, born of the nomads and then the Bedouin as they herded their flocks. But I notice that there is an interesting angle toward the end of this text chosen for our worship service today, and it involves what to do when and if the visitor is rejected, refused to be served in the appropriate way according to the expected protocols established once upon a time by their forebearers. Jesus says, "But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into the streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you! Yet know this: the realm of God has come near!'" Yes, just get over it! Shake it off! Move on to the next and hopefully more hospitable environ! Sound advice, indeed!

In last week's Gospel lection, we read that Jesus said to those who were considering following the rabbi to let the dead bury the dead, yes, a physical impossibility. But we are all smart enough to know the dangers associated with biblical literalism and are acutely aware that Jesus was telling these potential disciples that if they were going to dare contemplate the pros and cons of taking up their crosses and joining his merry band of men and women, that there was no time to spare, not a minute to waste. Jesus soberly reminds us of the danger of putting our hand back on the plow, even saying goodbye to friends and family! Basically, he is telling us not to look back, to live our lives in the

rearview mirror. They could not be given the chance to debate this decision, no time to vacillate as they pondered the ramifications, the consequences, of these life-altering acts. It was decision time! A choice had to be made, right then and right there! Time to get with the program, or not! Time to find a new road, as the car commercial says, or not! Time to choose when the fork in the road presents itself! As Yogi Berra is credited with saying, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it!" We cannot spend our lives spinning our wheels no matter the issue confronting us. Yes, the pressure was on because the stakes were so high! If we have learned anything as we live our lives, with or without any measure of faithfulness, we know full well how short our lives are, that as the biblical writer In Psalm 90 (12) invokes, our days are numbered. The self-absorbed Naamans of the world who continuously circle their own wagons because they cannot get out of their own way are everywhere. All of them concerned about protecting their territory, their turf, just existing to take up valuable space, our space, to absorb much time, much energy, many resources, sucking the life right out of every situation and every person they encounter. Only, if we let them!

**The lessons for today indicate to us that we are to do the best and the most that we can in any circumstance or situation, that we are to offer the gifts we have, even going to heroics, going beyond the required when necessary. When we have sought to do so, we have done enough, we have met any basic requirement perceived in our minds, enabling a circumstance or situation never our goal, a most unworthy outcome. As we have painfully learned during the pandemic of COVID, there comes a time when we must resume living, when we must move beyond the shackling confines of a viral affliction that we believe is here to stay. Our country must move beyond the tyrants and the oppressive hysteria of political psychoses along with the bigotry and racism that is accompanying, fomenting and fostering it, informing and impacting impressionable ignorant minds in the**

**process. The radical religious right and its partisan party co-conspirators is feeding, breeding, and fueling white supremacy in the name of Jesus of all peace-making people, and it is reprehensible! I am not detached when it comes to these issues, not at all an observer from afar because I was raised in a racist home in the racist South, the Klan a very real part of our family dynamic. For me, these issues are personal! The desire by many narrow-minded individuals is to return this nation to a white, male, dominant society while creating an autocratic, dictatorial, authoritarian Christian nationalist theocratic country. These agendas are blatantly obvious, despite delusional deniability by a variety of subversive constituents. As Liz Chaney said just last week in lauding the role of women in leadership, the men are not doing such a good job of it! Well said! So true, so very true!**

**Local missional churches like ours and the Church universal must move beyond the narrow confines, the dogmatic doctrinal strictures and creedal restrictions that have defined and shaped congregations and the larger ecclesial system for more than two thousand years. Many of you are acutely aware of children and grandchildren who do not attend a local church, who are no longer, if they ever were, steeple people. They find the stuff to which we desperately cling, stuff that no longer works for intellectually curious, critically thinking individuals, boring and yes, it so very often is, especially when we allow traditional paradigms and programs to infect our contemporary, twenty-first century, postmodern, progressive, inclinations that are so urgently needed if we are to have any chance of turning the ship around and make any headway with those who have turned a blind eye to our inane vain attempts at perfumed piety and sanitized religiosity, often masquerading as the lamest excuse for authentic, genuine, spirituality. The word for today to all of us is that we must find the resolve and the integrity to know when to say when, to know when enough is enough, to be sensitive to the still speaking Spirit of God about any of life's conundrums that confront and confound us.**

**For each and every one of us, there is only one of us! We cannot turn every stone, address every ill! We all have limited capacity! Elisha knew his boundaries and honored them. The rest was up to Naaman and his fickle and fanatical fancies. Jesus has extended an invitation with a very short shelf life. As the Gospel reminds us, “Many are called but few are chosen!” Know when to say when! In these dangerous, even perilous, times, all of us are called to account and called to action! Time’s a wasting! And while we are at it as we celebrate these United States of America, a little humility wouldn’t hurt either and would go a long way to begin a much needed, long overdue, opportunity for a healing process if one is at all even remotely possible at this stage of the game, this point in time! And as I said before, every opportunity is an opportunity!”**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and never says “when” when it comes to the likes of us! Amen and amen!**

