

When You Really Need a Miracle

2 Kings 5:1-14

First Presbyterian Church

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Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Sermon

Ok, so let's begin by naming who's in this story?¹ There's Naaman, of course – the great warrior of Aram. There are two kings – one who got so upset that he tore his clothes. There's Elisha, the man of God. He was probably a bit of a wild man... eccentric like his mentor, Elijah.

¹ My telling of this story draws from "What the Mighty Might Learn" by Barbara Lundblad, February 16, 2003 found at day1.org and "The Cheap Cure" by Barbara Brown Taylor published in Home By Another Way (Cowley-1999), p. 155-161.

Then, there's Naaman's wife, but she doesn't even have a speaking part. And finally, there are the servants. Without the all-important servants, there'd be no story... no cure... no happy ending... nothing remembered. And we know this story was remembered – in fact, Jesus knew it so well he referred to it in his very first sermon. "Now there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha," Jesus said in the synagogue in Nazareth, "but none of them was cleansed except Naaman, the Syrian." Jesus didn't mention the servants specifically, but he wouldn't have known the story without them.

The story does begin with Naaman... commander of the army of the king of Aram. The narrator paints a very big picture of this man: a four-star general... head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff... office with a view in the Aramean Pentagon... in favor with the king. Think Colin Powell, only with one important difference. Naaman did not photograph well... and it was always an awkward moment when he met with foreign heads of state. Some handled their surprise with grace, while others stared at him or looked away quickly. He had learned the hard way about shaking hands – it was better to offer a slight bow with both hands clasped behind his back.

You see, Naaman had leprosy... and all the greatness I just described cannot change this one terrible truth – this mighty warrior was infected with a disease so devastating that his skin seemed to be rotting on his bones. Leprosy was the most dreaded disease of his day... and even worse, it was no respecter of persons... which means that regardless how successful you have been, you were as vulnerable as anybody else.

We may have built a life that is great, but we live in a world that does not think we are too special to hurt. So, what do we do when the hurt finds us? Who do we turn to when the hurt finds us? It all begins with Naaman, but then someone else enters the story. She is a slave whom he had been carried off in a victorious raid into Israel. Mighty warriors were accustomed to taking booty. They could have whatever they wanted: gold, silver, chariots, horses... and people who became slaves.

This particular slave girl had been yanked from her home and now served Naaman's wife. She is as small as Naaman is big. The power he has is the power she lacks. She was the least of the least – a slave, a child, a girl. Yet, she knows something - something that none of the "high and mighty" in Syria know. And she is not silent: "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria," she told Naaman's wife, "he would cure him of his leprosy."

Now why did this young girl care about this man whose army had carried her away from her own people? That's one question, but here's another: Why did Naaman and the king even listen to what this slave girl had to say? It was a preposterous suggestion – when the king's own elite doctors had failed to cure Naaman he was supposed to go hunting a faith healer in Israel on the advice of a pre-adolescent servant-girl? But Naaman jumped at the chance. Why?

Well, if you've ever been that sick yourself, you understand why. Once you run out of doctors and specialists, once you've taken all the pills, applied all the ointments, practiced positive imaging 20 minutes every day and nothing has changed... if someone tells you about little-

known doctor in Mexico who has discovered a substance that works wonders, chances are you'll hop on a plane and go there. When there's something THAT WRONG in your life, things like fame and fortune, reputation and appearances just don't mean as much... and you are willing to go about anywhere... maybe even come to a place where the power of God is rumored to be found.

So, the King of Syria gave Naaman permission to go... and Naaman's entourage headed off with lots of money and gifts and a letter of introduction from his king. But when he got to Israel and the king read the letter, he went nuts. Knowing Aram had the better army, he feared this was a trick. "Am I God," he asked, "to give life or death that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" What's interesting here is that it didn't even occur to the king that he might not be in the center of things... that HIS power might not be the only power in Israel. "This is between kings and armies," he thought... because that's all he knew – he didn't know the first thing about healing power – the power of God.

And that's when Elisha enters - the wild man prophet. "Stop tearing your clothes," he tells the king. "You're not the only one around here with power, you know. Send the man to me so that he may learn there's a prophet in Israel." And with that, the king dropped out of the picture, his clothes ripped to shreds... standing there watching the cloud of dust disappear as the mighty warrior went to see Elisha.

When Naaman arrived, He lined up his chariots and horses, the gifts of gold and silver in Elisha's front yard and waited for the prophet to come out. What was the protocol, exactly? – he didn't know. Should he approach Elisha or let Elisha approach him? Was he supposed to kneel or something? He hoped not! He decided to offer a slight bow, hands behind his back. "Good sir," he would say, "I am General Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram." That should set the proper tone. Then he could soften up a little: "I have heard so much about you. I come with high hopes and quite a lot of money besides. I am prepared to pay anything you ask for your services."

But while Naaman was still rehearsing his speech, the door to Elisha's house opened and a messenger came out. "Go wash in the Jordan seven times," the man said, "and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."² Then he went back in. Naaman was so surprised he hardly heard what the man said. What kind of shabby welcome was this?

He was a man with authority... accustomed to speaking with kings. Who did Elisha think he was? At the very least, he owed his guest a seat in the shade and a cup of cool water. But what he REALLY expected was for Elisha to come out to him – to say some grand words – to make some grand gestures – so that Naaman would be cured in a spectacle that no one watching would ever forget.

² Taylor, p.159

Instead, he was being sent to splash up and down in the shallow, muddy river – something he had no intention of doing! It was too much... WAY too much! There were beautiful rivers in Aram to wash in – better than anything Israel had. “Could I not wash in them and be clean?” he sneered. Then he turned and drove away in a rage. And that would have been the end of it... except for the servants. Naaman's servants were mortified by their master's behavior. “Father,” they said, “if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”

You see, his servants knew him well – well enough to sense that he was more hurt than angry...and well enough to reason with him. “If he had asked you to do something difficult, you would have done it, wouldn’t you? Of course, he would! He was good at doing difficult things. That’s how he built his career and made his reputations. But nothing is more difficult than giving up control... nothing is more difficult than having faith which calls you to trust the message that salvation belongs to God.

Sometimes you will come to see me and tell me about things you are facing in your lives – your broken bodies, broken hearts, broken families, your children with broken spirits. Since I love you, I wish... oh, how I wish I could have some magic for you... that I could just wave my arm over the hurt and make it go away. But I am like Elisha’s boy... I’m like his servant boy that went out to Naaman... all I have is a message. And that message is that your life is special – YOU are special - not because you worked so hard or accomplished so much or rose so high... but because you are God’s child.

In God’s eyes you are indeed special – but you are never more than ordinary. And the quicker you and I admit that, the more we can enjoy how extraordinary God is. “We have this treasure in clay pots,” the Apostle Paul claims, “that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” What this means is that we are never more than ordinary... Like clay pots we contain the extraordinary treasure of God AND we are cracked and broken. Maybe the blessing in our brokenness is that it reminds us that we are not gods. Maybe it is the only way hard-working, independent, love-to-be-in-control folks like us can come to really know and enjoy God.³

Admitting his “ordinariness” – his brokenness – was really the beginning of Naaman’s cure. He was completely emptied out. His military reputation and royal connections did not keep him from getting leprosy... his gold and silver and bags full of money could not buy him a cure. And my guess it is that as the servants tried to talk Naaman into humbling himself as an ordinary man, he took another look at those white fingers, got another glimpse of his humanity, and decided then to turn the chariot around and go to the Jordan River.

³ Craig Barnes, When You Really Need a Miracle, 2007, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.

What a scene that must have been! Naaman the Great taking off his shiny armor... picking his way naked through the rocks to the deepest part of the river. He dips down once and comes up sputtering brownish water. The smell of fish is unmistakable, and the other soldiers are trying hard not to laugh. Second time he comes up cursing. And by the third time, he's ready to forget the whole thing, but he sees his servant on the bank holding up seven fingers. So, he goes down... again and again he goes under, until the last time when he finally dares look at his hands and his feet - his flesh was like that of a five-year old boy. It was smooth... it was fresh... he was well.

Craig Barnes writes of being fascinated by this command for Naaman to wash seven times wash in the water... seven times the great commander is humbled by doing the right thing. "All of our lives are spent somewhere between the first and seventh time doing the right thing," Barnes says. And I think he's right... all of our lives are spent somewhere between the first and seventh time doing the ordinary, right thing that the message of the Bible tells us to do. We confess sin, accept forgiveness, offer forgiveness, and try to do better. We come to worship on Sundays and have devotions during the week. We try to be a servant in our families and our jobs... we offer our money and time and talents to the church. Nothing spectacular... nothing too impressive. But at the end... when we cross the river and give up this life on earth, we will see that along the way we have been healed of our diseased hearts.

The point of the story, however, is not Naaman's healing... or ours. The point is to see that life isn't something you fix on your own... it was given to you by the grace of God, and it will be restored only by the grace of God. Those who believe this will find joy in this life just being ordinary... just doing the ordinary things they know to be right. And anyone who has found joy in being ordinary is already being healed.⁴

⁴ Barnes again.