

2 Kings 5: 1-19

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.

You get the picture already, don't you? This man, powerful physically and politically, a victor over Israel – *because of God's effort and will* – had a skin disease that threatened his power, his standing and his life.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

What is there about this "young girl"? – we don't know her name, we don't know how old she was. Old enough to be seen as useful, else she'd have been killed rather than taken captive. She must have had some skills, since she served the mighty General Naaman's wife. I wonder about her parents. I wonder what her parents and family and village had done in the few short years she lived with them to teach such indelible and strong faith: the prophet of her Lord Yahweh would cure Naaman.

No questions asked. Said with certainty.

When might *you* say that? Who has said that to you?

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And 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. He 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." When 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."

So here's the picture: The king of Aram and Naaman had previously invaded and devastated Israel. Now, because the King's favorite marauding general needs help that can only come from Israel, the King loads up Naaman and his large entourage with gold, silver and fine clothes. Bribes, in other words. The King of Israel is a threatened and confused man. Can he himself cure leprosy? Nope. Can we blame him for suspecting a plot by Naaman and the King of Aram – why else would this weird set of events be happening?

But 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?"

Bozo

“Let Naaman come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” But 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! 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?” He turned and went away in a rage.

The prophet Elisha seems to be an equal-opportunity disser: Naaman is “disrespected”, too! Big-guy General Naaman expects the puny Jewish prophet to run out of his house and fall down in honor, greeting the fierce and victorious general in a meek and obsequious manner. Elisha tells Naaman to go take a dip. Seven dips, to be exact. What’s that all about? Naaman’s question seems reasonable, doesn’t it? After traveling all that way, being detoured through the King of Israel’s court to no avail, hauling all that gold and treasure, he’s told that the waters of the river Jordan are special?

How does this make sense?

But 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’?” So 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.

So now, for the second time in this story, the people of no power speak sense to the mighty General Naaman. First, it was the little girl whose name we will never know – and she told Naaman’s wife, who, given the social structure of the time probably didn’t have all that much power herself – she told Naaman’s wife about *real* healing.

Now, it’s the servants who have courage. “Come on”, they say. “Get real. Get over yourself. Does it have to be *difficult* to be worthwhile? What are you trying to prove – if you could have cured yourself, you’d have done so – it’s no skin off your nose to try this guy’s idea!”

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!” Naaman urged him to accept, but he refused.

Elisha will *not* be bribed.

Then Naaman said, “If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I

bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.”

Naaman is a believer, but he’s in a pickle. His arrival – *cured* – back in the court of the King of Aram will be a sensation! Inquiring minds will want to know how it happened! The servants will be interviewed for Fox TV! People will wonder about the dirt – maybe Naaman’s wife will say, “Don’t even *think* about bringing that dirt into this house!” Yet she, too, will want to know... .how did this happen?

Naaman needs something he can point to, something he can use as a reminder of *where* he was cured and, more importantly, *by whom*. He may not expect anyone to believe his story, so his reminder is not proof – his reminder is a reminder for *himself*, when, as his faith is new, he fears he will get confused when he alone is in the Kingdom of Aram, and he alone is worshiping the King of Heaven.

...So, Joe, Naaman is about to leave the prophet Elisha’s home, after bathing in the Jordan River seven times and being cured of leprosy. He has tried to pay the prophet Elisha, but Elisha won’t take any money. He has tried to explain to Elisha that, though he believes in Israel’s God, still, he has to go back to Aram, and to pretend to worship Rimmon. He apologizes, and asks if he can take some of the dirt of Israel with him, so he can always remember the source of his healing.

We don’t worship dirt. We don’t worship the bible, the cross, teddy bears or blankies. We use them to bring us comfort, closer to the real comfort that comes from God. What does the real prophet of the real God say to Naaman, Joe?

Elisha said to Naaman, “Go in peace.”

“Never mind”, says the Lord’s servant Elisha. It doesn’t matter. God goes with you wherever you go. You are in God’s graces no matter what happens. Take the dirt, if you wish. Your cure is not in the dirt any more than it was in the water. Your cure is in the power of the God of Israel, but if you need the dirt to call to mind the saving power of the one living God, so be it. Go in peace.

Amen.