

# Too Easy?

July 7, 2019

Today's Hebrew scripture that Jeff read is truly magnificent. It's a story a lot of folks don't know, and it has a number of intricacies and so I'd actually like to spend most of our time today doing a really straightforward breaking open of that text. In doing so, I think the applications to our lives will be pretty clear.

But before we begin, it's always helpful to have just a little context. Stan Mast of Calvin Seminary writes of the books of 1 and 2 Kings, "it was a time of national decline led by wicked kings. That's what 1 and 2 Kings are all about. These books trace the long, slow descent of a nation into ruin and exile because its people are wicked and its kings are worse. In the middle of that moral and spiritual decline are these stories of Elijah and Elisha, prophets sent by God to rescue a sinking nation." It's also important to note that these two books are written AFTER the nation has sunk, after Israel is taken into exile in Babylon. In that, these are books that answer that age-old question, "How in the world did we get here?"

Now, let us start with Naaman.

Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Aram. In fact, not only was he the general, he was a powerful, successful general. This is "Stormin' Naaman," with swagger and clout. In an often overlooked phrase, we're told that "because of him, the LORD (that is OUR God) had given victory to Aram. That means that by Naaman, OUR God had given victory to Syria OVER Israel. The God of Israel had given a victory to another country over Israel. (We'll come back to this later.) And while Naaman is a strong and influential man, he has leprosy. He is strong yet ostracized, powerful yet pitied. People won't shake hands, stare too long, whisper. And it's painful, itchy, scaly, never comfortable.

5:2 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.

Again, what may seem like a small detail can have powerful import: A young slave girl, unnamed and foreign, is the agent of God here, the divine doesn't reveal themselves to the proud and the accomplished, but through a little foreigner who worshipped a different God than Naaman.

5:3 She said to her mistress, "If only your husband were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

This young slave girl seems to have a knowledge that the people in power don't.

5:4 So Naaman went in and told the king just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.

5:5 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.

So Naaman went to Israel with a letter of recommendation from the most powerful man in the land, with enough booty for the best cure that money could buy.

5:6 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 might cure him of his leprosy.”

5:7 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? He is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”

The king of Aram had been told that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure his general, and so he sent his general to the king of Israel. Naaman couldn't have possibly gone to the prophet directly. If he had, it would have been seen as either spying at a minimum and probably as an invasion. BUT, the king of Israel can't cure leprosy. So he thinks that this is a ruse to pick a fight, and he thinks that the king of Aram will say, “Well, you couldn't cure my star general, so here we are. We're going to invade.”

5:8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had thrown a fit, he sent a message to the king. “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he might learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

5:9 So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.

5:10 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.”

5:11 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!

5:12 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 didn't even come out of his house. He sent a messenger. Can you imagine a world leader who thinks a little bit of himself or even a general today who, when presenting themselves for healing, was greeted by a messenger? What? Am I not worthy of the prophet's time? He won't even see me, won't pray over me, won't wave his magic wand. And then he tells me to wash in the muddy Jordan River? Doesn't he know how

glorious the rivers are that we have back home? He tells me to wash in the Jordan? That's like telling someone to wash in the Fox in 1970.

5:13 But his servants approached and said to him, "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'?"

Here, once again, the healing of God is moved along by servants, the unnamed, those with no power, no prestige, no clout. There's something important here. It's people on the edges who often have a pulse on divine activity. It's people who aren't endowed with social power who know how to access divine power. One of our takeaways is to always be listening around the edges. These people on the edges offer the most straightforward lesson from this text: If the prophet had instructed you to do something difficult, you would have done it, but you're offended that he didn't spend any time with you, and then told you to do something simple?

While all of this exposition today has many different takeaways – little gems – this might be the richest place for us to mine. What are some of the things in life that could make a huge difference and yet we avoid them perhaps because they're too simple? Exercise. I don't stretch my back nearly as much as I should, and I know that that's why I'm going to sit down during Communion and have someone else serve. Communication. Julie Harder led a phenomenal workshop for couples this winter on the work of the Gottman Institute. Everyone who took the workshop found it to be deeply valuable, but it wasn't some new knowledge, some radical, revelatory scheme. At its core were exercises and practices in listening and communicating effectively.

There are so many other little things that we can do in life, easy things that would allow us to live our deepest, richest, most meaningful godly life, and yet somehow we're resistant. I lifted up good communication with your spouse, but good communication is critical with your children, and your boss, and your peers as well. And yet how often are we willing to devolve into sniping, into our preset notions of communication. Pay your bills on time or, if you can't, make a payment plan. I worked in collections one summer and let me tell you we were so much more lenient on people who reached out to us first rather than the people we had to hound. Be honest. Don't put too much on your plate – literally or figuratively. Pay a living wage. Eat your vegetables.

Kathryn Matthews, the retired Dean of Amistad Chapel at the UCC headquarters in Cleveland, writes of this passage, "What I sense is that in each of these actions, in all situations and from whatever source, however unexpected, however ordinary, is the movement of God and the power of compassion in our lives. God's healing comes from surprising places and in most unanticipated ways, but it comes nevertheless." And while personal healing is the overt takeaway from this particular passage, don't forget the overall context of 1 and 2 Kings – the downfall of a favored nation because of the wickedness of its people and its rulers. Within that, Stan Mast with the Center for Excellence in Preaching points out that today's passage reminds us:

This is a story about trusting and obeying God in the midst of those other concerns, about trusting God rather than our party, about prioritizing God rather than our portfolio. It is about who is in charge and how we can be saved.

Whether you are a little girl serving humbly in a hard place or a great person enjoying the trappings of power and success, whether you live by a muddy river or the majestic shores of Lake Michigan, whether you are a firm believer in the one true God or you barely know God's name, whether you are a dirty sinner or a spotless saint, a Republican or a Democrat, an American or a Canadian, in exile from God or as close to God as you can be, remember the message of this straightforward but not simple story: God can, and does, work through all of us for grace and healing and hope.

Kathryn Matthews again, "And you and I, along with "nameless servants" and mighty generals all the same, are free to move into the river, step into the deep waters of God's own care, and emerge restored and renewed. Let's pray for the good sense and the good grace to say yes when we hear those words, no matter the source, and to know God's healing in our lives."

Indeed, may it be so. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11**  
July 7, 2019