



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 4 – Proper 9 Year C

The Healing of Naaman

[RCL]: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

There are many stories in the Old Testament which may make little sense to us – stories which are difficult to understand, or confusing, or maybe even offensive. So, when we have a story like the one this morning, full of interesting characters and human intrigue, it's important to take note! Our story this morning has a few important characters, but it focuses on the healing of Naaman – a great warrior in the army who suffered from leprosy.

As part of his career as a commander in the army, Naaman has a slave girl – a girl whom he had captured and stolen on one of his raids. This girl, who has been taken from her hometown, becomes the catalyst for his healing. She is a servant to Naaman's wife, and she sees the pain the couple is experiencing. She sees the effect, the hold, that this illness has on his life, and she suggests something to her mistress. She shares the information, the experience she has had, with the prophet in Samaria. She posits that this prophet has the capacity to heal Naaman.

As a response to this news, Naaman tells his king. He goes to his higher-up and says that he just might have the potential to be healed. And the king listens and puts his authority behind this plan. He offers to write a letter to the King of Israel – ruler to ruler – to put his weight behind this plan.

So, Naaman sets off. He packs up money and gifts and goes to the King of Israel, who receives this letter. On reading the letter, the king panics. He tears his clothes and despairs – “Am I God?” he asks. “Can I bring death or life? This man is trying to fight me!” He feels that too much is being asked of him, and he doesn't know how to respond.

So, while the king is having his panic, Elisha hears about it. He hears that the king has torn his clothes, and he sends his own message. “Send Naaman to me!” he says. So, once again, Naaman goes off on his journey.

When he gets to Elisha's house, Elisha sends a messenger out to greet him and to give him instructions on how to heal himself. Naaman, rather than being grateful, is mad. He's come all this way, and the prophet

doesn't even come out to see him? Plus, the river he's instructed to wash in is just the plain old Jordan River. What a letdown! At first, he refuses to do as he is told, but one of his servants, who has accompanied him on this journey, talks him into it. Lo and behold, after he does as he is told, Naaman is cured. He gets his miracle!

In this story, we have many characters – Naaman, Naaman's wife, the servant girl, the King of Aram, the King of Israel, Elisha, a messenger, and a servant of Naaman. This story names, specifically, at least eight people – and this is clearly a simplified version of the story. Every single one of these people plays an important role in the miracle that happens—they each play an important role in Naaman's healing. Each of us has, at some time, been near someone who is ill and suffering. Perhaps this was a grandparent or parent, a friend, a sibling, or maybe a spouse. When we are around suffering and sickness, it can be tempting to look only to medical professionals for healing. They are supposed to bring our miracle! We don't want to lose a loved one – so, in avoiding that loss, we often pray for a healing miracle.

Part of what draws us to this story about Naaman is exactly the healing that takes place – and yet, it isn't quite like anyone expected. The healing, first of all, takes a whole community. Without any of these people, the story wouldn't have turned out quite the same. In fact, the one who sets all these things in motion is the slave girl who was captured from Israel – who has, of all the characters in the story, the least power. This is a story about a great army commander and kings and a prophet – and yet the ones who first give the good news and speak a word of hope are the women: this girl who has been captured and taken against her will and the woman who is her owner. I wonder whether, if they said nothing at all, Naaman would have been healed.

Both of these women had to take up their responsibility – one in sharing a word of hope and her own resources, and the other in passing the word along to her husband. Though our passage records only one conversation, for those of you who are married, you know that to get another person to agree to something often takes a number of strategic encounters and conversations. Finally, Naaman agrees.

We then come to the King of Aram – he could have decided that this was too much – that he didn't want to risk losing such an impressive commander. But rather than stand in opposition, the king uses his power for good; he throws his political weight behind getting Naaman what he needs.

The King of Israel, when he receives the letter and the group with whom Naaman is traveling, has perhaps the hardest time. He agonizes over what he cannot do. He forgets that it isn't entirely up to him – forgets that he is not an island but part of a community – and he struggles. He is being asked to do something beyond his capability—but he isn't God! He can't heal anyone!

Luckily, while the king is having this moment of crisis, Elisha hears about the whole thing and sends for Naaman. Elisha gives his messenger the instructions – detailing what is needed for the healing to happen – and that messenger tells Naaman. When Naaman finally gets the instructions – finally gets what he came

for – he’s surprisingly resistant. This healing doesn’t look like he thought it would – and anyway, if it’s this easy, why did it take so long to figure it out?

Maybe, as you read this story today, you are identifying with one of these characters. Maybe you can identify with Naaman – frustrated that the miracle you were looking for isn’t what you expected. If so, we pray that your eyes might be opened to the gift that is being offered to you, even if it looks unusual.

Maybe you can identify with the King of Israel – not sure what you are supposed to do about a situation. If so, we pray that you see the community surrounding you and know that you are not alone.

Maybe you can identify with the King of Aram – putting the power you have behind a person, trying to use your influence for good. If so, we pray that you give what you are able and then release the problem.

Maybe you can identify with one of the messengers – along for the journey, bearing witness to the dynamics of a big cast of characters. If so, we pray that you would prompt them along their way – to offer words and actions of encouragement.

Maybe you can identify with one of the women – beginning conversations about something delicate, wanting to offer the knowledge you have. If so, we pray that you would be gifted with patience and discernment, choosing when and how to have hard conversations.

Maybe you can even identify with Elisha – holding the words of healing that someone else is looking for. If so, we pray you would recognize those words for what they are and be bold in sharing them.

Wherever you are on your journey, may this story bring you some companionship. May each of us see ourselves somewhere and know that we are not alone. We are tied up together in the story God is writing of God’s presence with us, God’s people. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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