

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, a man is healed of his skin disease. At first glance, it may seem obscure. After all, it was almost, 2,800 years ago and 7,000 miles away. Yet the story of General Naaman and his healing has profound implications for us as 21st century Americans. Because Naaman is a lot like us. So, I want to look at his story this morning.

The story starts in the Kingdom of Aram, which today is called Syria. The capital, then as now, is the beautiful city of Damascus. At this time, Syria was a perennial enemy of Israel. They were often at war, and Syria usually won.

But in our lesson from 2Kings chapter 5, Syria and Israel apparently are in the middle of some kind of cease fire. And there, we are introduced to Naaman. Naaman is a Syrian General. Not only that, he's the head general. He's the chairman of the Syrian Joint Chiefs of Staff. He's described as a great man. He's in good with the king. He's a successful general. He wins battles. He's a mighty warrior. But after this glowing description of Naaman, the Hebrew OT adds one word. Leprous. This guy is a great and powerful man. But he has leprosy.

Now, ancient leprosy is a bit different from modern leprosy. It was characterized by white scaly patches of skin, with reddening, and perhaps with open running sores. It wasn't fatal. But it was painful and annoying.

But it turns out, that one of Naaman's slave girls is a captured Israelite. She tells Naaman's wife that there is prophet in Samaria, which is a part of Israel. And the girl says that this prophet can cure Naaman of his leprosy. Apparently, Naaman takes that message to heart, because he's passes that information on to his king.<sup>1</sup>

Now think about this for a minute. This foreign slave girl is at the bottom of the pecking order. Yet her information is passed on by the #1 general to the king himself.

Apparently Naaman is desperate for a cure for his leprosy. He's desperate enough to listen to the testimony of a little foreign slave girl.

Think of it in today's terms. Would the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff take medical advice from the girl who cleaned his restroom? What if she had just gotten off of the boat from a third world country? "Hey general, I know this faith healer back in my homeland. He'll fix you right up." Then he goes to his boss, "Your majesty--send me down there to see that foreign faith healer." Doesn't sound very likely. Yet it is through this unlikely connection between young Israelite slave girl and powerful Syrian general that God is working.

It's a good lesson for us. We often pigeonhole people. And if someone is in the wrong category, we tend not to listen to them. "They're too young. Or they're too old. Or they're too liberal. Or they're too conservative. They're too poor. They're too different from me. What can they possibly be able to tell me?" The message of this story is, be careful about doing that. God may just be speaking to you through someone that you've written off. Don't assume. Listen.

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<sup>1</sup> 2Kings 5:2-4

Naaman does listen to his foreign slave girl. And the king listens to General Naaman. So, the king sends Naaman down to Israel. He even gives him a letter to take to the King of Israel. And don't miss what that means. The King of Syria is admitting that he has no power over Naaman's disease. It's also an admission that the Syrian gods are powerless. Naaman and the king are powerful men. Yet, at some level, they have to admit to being powerless.

But don't miss what else they do. They do the same thing we often do. They try to throw money at the problem. Naaman goes to Israel and takes along 10 talents of silver and 6,000 shekels of gold.<sup>2</sup> In our economy that's about \$5,000,000 in silver, and another \$1,000,000 in gold. So Naaman's taking with him about \$6,000,000, plus ten sets of expensive designer garments. This is a big bribe or a big gift or a big fee depending upon how you look at it. Naaman REALLY wants to be cured.

So Naaman's motorcade pulls up in front of the King of Israel's palace. He's in his chauffeur-driven chariot with a couple of Syrian flags flying on the fenders. He's got the armored car behind him with \$6,000,000 in cash.

And he walks up to the King of Israel and pulls the letter out of his briefcase. "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."<sup>3</sup>

The King of Israel says basically, 'What the heck do they expect me to do about it? How can I cure leprosy? That's ridiculous. The king of Syria is just trying to pick a fight with me. He's just looking for an excuse to invade.'<sup>4</sup>

Notice what the King of Israel is missing. He's missing God. God doesn't even hit his radar screen. The king of Israel is only thinking geopolitically.

Again, there's a good lesson for us. We often react to the events of life without keeping God on our front burner. Or God might not even be on our back burner. Yes, we might even have God in our closet or garage. He's there in storage if we need him. But God is not the first thing that comes to mind. We'll often try everything else. Then, when we run out of other options, we'll go to God. That's the way the king is operating.

And it's at this point that the prophet Elisha catches wind of it. So, Elisha sends word to the king: "Let (the general) come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."<sup>5</sup> It's something of a rebuke to the king: 'You should have been thinking of God, not thinking about your political situation.'

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<sup>2</sup> 2Kings 5:5

<sup>3</sup> 2Kings 5:6

<sup>4</sup> 2Kings 5:7

<sup>5</sup> 2Kings 5:8

So, Naaman gets back in the chariot and the motorcade heads to Elisha's house and stops at the entrance. Don't miss that. They halt at the entrance, but they don't go in. They stop at the door.

Looks like Naaman's pride and self-importance are getting the way here. It's as if he's saying, "I might walk into a king's palace, but I'm not going into this prophet's house. I'm important. The prophet should come out to greet me."

But Elisha doesn't play that game. Elisha sends one of his flunkies out who says, 'The prophet Elisha wants you to dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times. Then you'll be cured.'<sup>6</sup>

And what's Naaman's reaction? He's mad. 'That's it? The prophet sends word to jump in the river seven times?<sup>7</sup> He doesn't even come out to see me? He doesn't wave his hands over me and go, "Abracadabra"?''

'Besides,' Naaman says, 'the Jordan is an ugly muddy river. The rivers in Syria are snow fed from the mountains. They're much cleaner. If the prophet wants me to jump in the river, the rivers back home are much better.'<sup>8</sup>

So we're told, General Naaman leaves Elisha's house in a RAGE. His pride has got the better of him.

Remember, Naaman wanted desperately to be cured. He brought \$6,000,000 with him. But his pride gets in the way at a crucial moment.

But one of his servants keeps his cool. He says, 'General, if this guy had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it.'<sup>9</sup>

Basically, he's saying, 'You would have walked across a tightrope over a pit full of alligators while live ammunition was being shot off all around you. But you won't dip yourself in a muddy river?' So, Naaman listens to this servant. He goes down and dips himself seven times in the Jordan. And he is cured. The leprosy is gone

Naaman is not just cured. He also gets a major attitude adjustment emotionally. And Naaman is given a wake-up call spiritually.

Naaman starts out sort of halfway there. He knows that his king and his gods can't cure his leprosy. And yet, he is still very hooked on his own power. Look at how he goes down to Israel. He takes a column of chariots. He takes a lot of money. He takes a letter from the King of Syria. Naaman is doing everything out of a power mode. But Elisha asks him to humble himself and jump in a muddy river. Naaman almost blows it. He almost lets his pride get in the way.

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<sup>6</sup> 2Kings 5:10

<sup>7</sup> 2Kings 5:11

<sup>8</sup> 2Kings 5:12

<sup>9</sup> 2Kings 5:13

But then he lets go of his own sense of self-importance and he does what Elisha said. And he is healed.

He comes out of the river a different man. Our reading stopped with v14. But right after, Naaman professes faith in God. He says, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." He offers to pay Elisha. He says, "Please accept a present from your servant."<sup>10</sup>

Don't miss that word. He's calling himself Elisha's servant. Before he had waited imperiously in the chariot. Now he acts out of humility.

Before he had rejected the idea of jumping in a muddy Israeli river. But at the end, he will ask permission to take back two loads of Israeli dirt with him, so that he can always worship the God of Israel on Israeli soil.<sup>11</sup> Inferior dirt becomes holy ground.

General Naaman's attitude is turned around 180°. General Naaman is healed. Naaman's wealth doesn't make him happy or whole. Naaman's power doesn't bring a cure. In the end, it is doing what God asks that brings him healing. Naaman swallows his pride and follows God's simple commands.

Dipping himself in a muddy river seems too simple. But it's what God asks.

This week, I would encourage you to do those simple things that God asks.

Spend time praying. God wants relationship with you. Make the time to be in relationship. Talk to God.

Find a few moments to read your Bible. God has sent you a wonderful love letter. Read it. If you don't know where to start, ask me—I'd be glad to offer some suggestions. Or look online at our website under "Spiritual resources."

Try to be loving to the people God places in your path. You can't change the whole world. But you can have a positive influence on your little part of the world.

Share from your abundance with those who are less fortunate. We've been given so much, and we spend much of it on our own toys and comforts, when others are in desperate need. Share just a little bit.

If God wanted you to do something big, you'd want to do it.

Why not do the simple things that God asks?

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<sup>10</sup> 2Kings 5:15

<sup>11</sup> 2Kings 5:17