

2 Kings 5: 1-14

7-1-18

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Perhaps some of you will spend an evening watching fireworks this week, live or on TV, or shooting some off in your backyard and celebrating the “Sweet Land of Liberty” we live in. After all that is what the fireworks are all about. We call it Independence Day but sometimes I wish we would call it Freedom Day, so we could spend a little more time wondering what that word means. What are we free from? What are we free for? How do I know I am really free? Is my sweet liberty strictly a political thing – my freedom to speak, my freedom to vote – or is it a larger idea, one that includes having enough money to do what I want to do, or being able to choose how I will spend my time?

One of the most peculiar things about America, it seems to me, is that we have so much freedom and are still so unwell. As a nation we may be strong, but we are not particularly healthy. Our families, our schools, our cities, and our political systems are all showing signs of disease. Beefed up on wealth and power, we can look pretty good from the outside, but the truth is that inside we are feeling a little shaky.

A few minutes ago we heard the story of Naaman the Syrian, whose main claim to fame is that Jesus mentioned him in a sermon once (Luke 4:27). His story is found in the second book of Kings, which is just what it sounds like – a history of the kings of Israel, from David to Zedekiah. Naaman shows up about halfway through, in the ninth century before Christ, when Jehoam was king of Israel. Although Israel and her neighbor Aram (which we now call Syria) were frequently at war, they were momentarily at peace, Aram had the better army, however, and Israel knew it. Israel even knew the name of the commander of the Aramean army, since he had beaten up on them more than once. His name was Naaman, which means “pleasant” – an unlikely name for a warrior, perhaps – but even his enemies admitted that Naaman was a great man, whom God had favored in Battle. The only problem was that Naaman did not photograph well. He had leprosy, which was not as big a problem for a Syrian as it might have been for a Jew, but which ate away at Naaman in more ways than one.

He was a national hero, for goodness’ sake. He had an office with a view at the Aramean Pentagon. He hobnobbed with heads of state, but there was always that awkward moment when he met people for the first time. Some handled their surprise well, but others stared at him or looked away quickly. He was so tired of seeing the questions register on their faces. *Good Lord, is that stuff contagious?*

*Poor guy. It must be awful to have to deal with that. Why doesn't he just stay home and spare himself the grief?* But their questions were nothing compared to his own. If God favored him, then why was he sick? And why couldn't anyone in Aram make him well?

Naaman's help came from a source he never expected – a young, Jewish girl who had been taken captive during one of his military raids on Israel. She was the least of the least – a slave, a child, a girl. The book of Kings doesn't even give her a name, but she was the one who led Naaman to his cure. She did not speak directly to him – but spoke to his wife whom she served, "There is a prophet in Samaria who could cure him of his leprosy!"

It was a preposterous suggestion. When the king's own physicians had failed to do Naaman any good, he was supposed to go hunting for a faith healer in Israel on the advice of slave girl? It was preposterous, but Naaman jumped right on it. If you have ever been that sick yourself then you understand why. Once you run out of respectable doctors, having done everything they said – once you have taken the pills, practiced the 20 minutes of positive thinking a day and nothing has changed – well if someone tells you about a clinic in Mexico where a doctor with a degree in veterinary medicine has discovered a substance that

works wonders on humans, there is a good change you will get in your car and go there. It may sound preposterous, but if you really want to get well, then you cannot afford to leave any stone unturned – even if the stone turns out to be a holy man in Israel.

As soon as Naaman's wife told him what the slave girl had said, he went to see the king of Aram, who was happy to oblige his star general. "Go then," the king said to him, "and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." Naaman took the letter and went home to pack. Since he had no idea what a cure for leprosy cost, he emptied his bank account, loading his chariots with seven hundred fifty pounds of silver and one hundred fifty pound of gold, plus ten sets of fine clothes. Then he kissed his wife goodbye and set off for Israel, where he presented his letter to the king.

"When this letter reaches you," it said, "know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." It was a nice gesture, however misguided. The problem was that Naaman's boss, the king of Aram, did not understand about real power. He thought the king of Israel was the man to see – that if there was a cure available in Israel then the king would surely know about it. Only the king did not know about it, because the only kinds of power he

had were political power and military power. He did not know one thing about healing power – the power of God- which was why he got so upset when he read the letter.

The first thing he did before he told anyone what it said, was to grab his royal robe and tear it right down the middle. Then he howled out loud. “Am I God, to give death or life,” he said, “that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” It sounded like a trap to him. The king of Aram had asked him to do something he could not do so that Aram would have an excuse to declare war on Israel. It was all politics to him. Politics was all he knew.

Word of the king’s distress got around town pretty quickly. When Elisha – the prophet whom the Jewish slave girls knew about, even though the king of her country did not – when Elisha heard about it, he sent a message to the king. “Why have you torn your clothes?” he asked. “Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

That may not have been a strange message at the time, but it sounds pretty strange now. Who would think of going to a prophet for a cure? For a prediction about the future maybe, or for a hair-raising sermon on the righteousness of God, but for help with a skin disease? What a strange idea.

But as I said before, when you really, really want to get well, you will try anything. So Naaman got directions to Elisha's house. On the way over he prepared the speech he would give, "I am General Naaman, commander of the army of Aram. I come with high hopes and quite a lot of money. I am prepared to pay anything you ask for your services."

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 to Naaman, "and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

Naaman was furious. He had fully expected Elisha to come out to him – there in the yard – to say some grand words, to make some grand gesture, so that Naaman was cured in a spectacle that no one watching would ever forget. Instead, he was being sent away by a messenger, to go splash in the shallow, muddy Jordan River like a five-year old boy – he – General Naaman, commander of the army of the king for Aram, with nine hundred pounds of gold and silver in his luggage!

"Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" Naaman spat out. "Could I not wash in them and be clean?" Then he turned and went away in a rage.

His servants must have known him pretty well- well enough to know that he was more hurt than mad – because they tiptoed up to him and convinced him to give it a try. *If he had given you something hard to do, you would have done it, they reasoned with him. So he gave you something simple. So?*

It was the beginning of Naaman's cure. He was completely emptied out. His royal connections had gotten him nowhere. His reputation had gotten him nowhere. His bags full of money had gotten him nowhere. Elisha would not even come out of the house to meet him, and now he had been given this supremely stupid thing to do – to strip down in front of all his men and take the world's longest bath in a river that barely came up to his knees.

But because he really, really wanted to get well, he did it. He left his clothes and shoes on the bank. The water was greenish and smelled of fish. There was nothing remotely sacred about it. Naaman found a place to kneel and sank down for the first time. Seven times he made the passage from cold to hot, from river to sun. Each time he rose he sucked air like a newborn. By the seventh time, he was winded. He was also very clean. When he looked down at his skin, he saw the flesh of a five year old. It was smooth. It was fresh. He was well.

Later on he tried to pay Elisha, but Elisha would not hear of it. "Your money's no good here," he told Naaman. "God works for free." So it was a cheap cure. All Naaman had to do was follow directions. All he had to do was empty himself out, abandoning, the pretense that who he was or what he was worth could get him what he needed. All he had to do was strip himself down until his hurt flesh was exposed for everyone to see and go play in the water like a little boy. Then God did for him what military victories and kings and bags of money could never do. God restored his flesh. God created him all over again, and he was made new.

I could explain this story to death. But I don't think I will. But maybe the next time you are saying your prayers for this great, marvelous, shaky nation of ours, you will remember that great, leprous man, Naaman, whose wealth and power turned out to be useless to him in his search for health, and who was ready to trade it all in when God surprised him with a cheap cure that made him truly free.

Gracious God, we often look to other places for security + healing. Just as you healed Naaman bring healing into our lives + the world.