
Reflection: The Healing of Naaman
2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30

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Back in February, when Obama's health care reform bill debates were in the forefront of the news in the US, many people on both sides of the border were scandalized when Danny Williams, the Premier of Newfoundland traveled to the US to get heart surgery to replace his mitral valve. The surgery is available in Canada, through our public health care system, but he chose to go down to Florida and pay privately for the procedure. He said "This is my heart, it's my health and it's my choice." People on both sides of the border argued that this decision was caused by a lack of confidence in the Canadian medical system.

I'm sure it wasn't a decision he took lightly—he must have known the consequences to his reputation in Canadian politics and how bad the optics were, but when all is said and done, when you are ill, really ill, you will do anything to find healing. Even risk your reputation and travel to another country.

Now Naaman was also a powerful political figure in his day. He was the equivalent of a five star general in Aram, one of the countries bordering the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was a hero in his homeland, respected and honoured, and also very, very wealthy, as he kept a share of the plunder that he brought back to his King.

But life was not so perfect anymore—something had happened that was causing him both pain and shame. He had contracted a skin disease. He found it humiliating that his soldiers no longer respected him like they once had—after all, they thought, he must be punished by the gods to go from the once dashing figure in uniform on his high horse, to the one brought low and disfigured, ashamed to be seen in public.

He must have visited every doctor in Damascus—rubbing on strange lotions and drinking foul-tasting potions, but nothing helped. He was so desperate, that when his wife casually mentioned a suggestion by one of her slave girls he jumped on it. This young nameless girl, who had been captured in a raid on Israel becomes the pivotal character in the story in bringing about God's healing. She suggests to her mistress, Naaman's wife, that "if only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." This young girl who has been in Aram for a while as a foreign slave, remembers the stories she has heard about the prophet, Elisha—tales of healing and wonders that he has done in Yahweh's name, and she wistfully suggests that he would for sure bring healing to Naaman. We never learn her name—perhaps it was Leah, or Miriam or Sarah,

but whatever it was, we know that she has carried her faith in Yahweh with her. She has not forgotten who and whose she is, and she has the audacity, really when you think of it, to suggest that her master would find healing in a foreign land, by a foreign God.

Naaman's wife tells her husband of this prophet in Samaria, and of the chance of healing, and no sooner is the story out of her mouth than Naaman is going to his king with the suggestion. He knows the diplomatic protocol, that he can't just waltz into Israel demanding to see this prophet, and so his king writes a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. And so he rushes home with this scroll and packs his chariots and hastily prepares a retinue to travel with him. Naaman expects that the healing would not come cheap, so he empties his storehouse of riches, and fills several chariots with hundreds of kilos of gold and silver and expensive garments. I did a rough estimate of the worth of the gold and silver he brought in today's money, and it came to \$3,700,500. This is a sign of how desperately Naaman wants this healing—how much he is willing to pay this foreign healer.

Now the king of Israel at that time, so scholars tell us, was King Jehoram, son of the wicked King Ahab, who had been killed by none other than... wait for it... Naaman, the Aramean general. So you can imagine, that he is not too excited to hear that Naaman the great enemy warrior is at the palace gate requesting an audience. And when he reads the letter from King Benhadad of Aram, he crumples—he is sure it is a trick, the Arameans must be trying to pick another war with Israel by requesting the impossible, that Naaman be healed of his affliction. He thinks that Naaman and his king are expecting him, the king of Israel to do the healing himself. And how does he respond—all diplomacy goes out the door as he tears his clothes—an ancient sign of mourning, he calls out a confession that only Yahweh can give and take life and can heal.

Word of the king's act of despair and grief travels like wildfire through the court and out into the streets of Samaria, soon reaching the house of Elisha, the prophet, who sends word to the king that he should send Naaman to him, so that he might know that there is a prophet in Israel. And so Naaman, and his grand retinue of chariots, and horses, and donkeys, soldiers and servants arrive outside the humble house of the prophet.

You can feel the tension in the air. Naaman is hoping above all hopes, that here, at last, he will be healed. He can't imagine what strange powerful acts the prophet will perform, to call his God of Israel down to cure him. Surely there will be sacrifices and burnt offerings and incantations and rituals. He was prepared for

all of it, but not prepared for what happened next. While they're still at the entrance, perhaps waiting for the prophet to come out to greet them, a lowly messenger, not Elisha himself, is sent out and says—"Go and wash seven times in the Jordan river and your flesh will be restored and you will be clean."

What? What? This is not the dramatic healing that Naaman is expecting. He's furious. He thinks he's getting the brush off. That so called prophet doesn't even have the courtesy to come out to meet him. How can he be healed if he is not even examined? Does this prophet even know who he is and where he is from? The rivers of Damascus, his hometown are better than this muddy Jordan. Surely, he could wash in them and get clean. He had humiliated himself so much to travel to this foreign country, to see this faith healer, and now he is expected to get in their murky, piddly river, and wash? Naaman puffs up his chest, and forgetting his humiliation over the skin disease, storms off.

Just when it seems like all is lost, that healing is no longer a possibility, the situation turns around thanks to some more anonymous servants who save the situation. They have the wisdom and the guts to approach their master and say, 'Look, sir, if the prophet had told you to do something very difficult, wouldn't you have done it?' I laughed out loud when I read this. This is so true, not only of Naaman, but of many of us. We go to our doctors expecting prescriptions for drugs, and blood tests and MRIs, and we end up disappointed if we are sent away empty handed, told to take an aspirin, or rest, or take some weight off. Even though we have all heard about over-prescription of antibiotics causing bacteria to become antibiotic resistant, we still expect a prescription when we think we have an infection. Are we like that in other aspects of our life too, expecting experts to provide complicated advice, when the answer is in fact much more simple than we could even imagine?

We could all do with people like Naaman's servants in our lives to help us get real again, to help strip away the pompous self-righteousness that keeps us from seeking healing and restoration.

And so Naaman humbles himself. He went down, literally and metaphorically. He went down in status, he went down to that muddy little river, and he stripped off his fancy robes and walked right in. Standing there in the Jordan, he opened himself up to the possibility of God and of healing, as he submerged himself in the waters over and over. Seven days of creation, seven days of Passover, and seven dips in the Jordan. A good biblical number. And when he was finished—miracle of miracles—he was healed. His flesh was restored—it

is described by the writer as like that of a small child. Like that of the small child, who, at the beginning of the story, set him on his quest for healing.

That's where the lectionary finishes the story, with the now healed foreign general delighting in his healing, laughing and crying, touching his new skin with awe and amazement. But so what? Another miracle story of the prophet Elisha, but there's much more to the story than just an ordinary healing.

Remember that this was no ordinary patient. He's not even one of Yahweh's people—he's a powerful enemy. As Naaman rises up out of the waters of the Jordan, the river that stands as a powerful theological symbol of boundaries and baptisms, the river in which John the baptizer will baptize throngs of people who are re-turning to God, and the river in which Jesus himself will be baptized when the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends. And that's what this image conjures up when we hear this story through our Christian filters—baptism. Being washed clean—being born of water and the Spirit. And we can't help rejoice in the fact that YAHWEH, the God of life, welcomes all into God's healing waters—it doesn't matter where we come from, what we do, all are welcome.

The lectionary cuts the scene right here, fade to black. The End. But it's not the end of the story—in fact, the most surprising part is not just the healing. We've actually been expecting that all along, even if the story has taken a number of twists and turns. What happens next is Naaman's surprising profession of faith—he responds to his healing by returning to the prophet, who we actually see now in person for the first time, standing before him surrounded by all of his own people, and making a very risky confession—“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

He has come to believe in YAHWEH. And he tries to offer Elisha a lavish gift as payment for his healing, but Elisha won't take it. And then in another surprising twist, Naaman asks for something—he wants to take a couple of mule loads of earth from Israel back home to Damascus, so that he can build an altar there and worship the God of Israel. His response to the healing is faith. One can almost hear Jesus saying, “Go, your faith has made you well.” In fact, the other time that Naaman is mentioned in the Bible is when Jesus uses him as a sermon illustration to explain his mission with outsiders in his first sermon in the Synagogue at Nazareth “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”¹

¹ Luke 4:27

God's healing and love knows no borders. The Amazing Grace is freely given—there is no requirement to be one particular nationality or gender, or sexuality, or class, or any of the ways we put people in boxes that separate them from us. God's grace rests as much on those we can't stand as it does on us. Naaman is such a great example—he's willing to seek out this God who heals, but initially it's on his terms. He is coming to the situation with his preconceptions about God, as we all do, and he is in many ways still trying to call the shots. It's difficult to just give up your power if you are used to it. He expects it to be complicated, but it's simple. He expects it to be expensive, but it's free.

Are we like that in our relationship with God—expecting it to be much more complicated. Do we think we have to do things to earn God's love? Are we still carrying around guilt and shame that we imagine to be keeping God distant, feeling unworthy when in fact we are loved unconditionally? I know that this is the place where I often find myself—and have to consciously work at letting go of all that stuff that gets in the way of my relationship with God. And I'm pretty sure that I'm not alone. And when we do remember God's love and healing, the joy of this good news calls to mind the psalm we heard—a psalm that was written to celebrate a healing:

*I cried to You for help; to You
I pleaded for forgiveness:
"What profit in my riches if
I am separated from Love?
Will emptiness praise You?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?*

*Hear, O my Beloved, and be gracious to me!
O Love, come to my assistance!"*

*And You turned my mourning into dancing;
You set me free and
clothed me with gladness.
Now my soul may praise You and not be silent,*

*O my Beloved, I will be grateful to You
forever and ever. Amen.*