

Least Known, Most Interesting: Naaman

2 Kings 5:1-19

July 31, 2016

We are continuing our summer sermon series on the lesser known characters of the Bible who can teach us some things about what it means to be faithful in our day-to-day lives.

Today we will meet a man named Naaman. Our second Scripture reading is from 2 Kings. Like the story we heard from Mark's gospel, this is another story about a healing. In our reading, the prophet Elisha heals Naaman.

There's a lot going on this piece of Scripture – so let me set the stage. Naaman is from Aram – which is present day Syria. At the time of this Scripture, Aram was a powerful empire. And – it is important to know – Aram has already defeated the kingdom of Israel – Aram's tiny neighbor to the south. Naaman is, effectively, the Chairman on the Joint Chiefs of Staff within the Kingdom of Aram. He has the king's favor because he has won many battles and vanquished many foes.

That Naaman would go to Israel – this sworn enemy that Naaman has already trampled under foot – in order to seek healing tells us something about how desperate Naaman was. And what Elisha helps him find is a lot more than healing.

Listen with me for the word of the Lord...

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Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 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. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 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. 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 may cure him of his leprosy.' 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? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 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.' 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! 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. But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, 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"?' So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.' But he said, 'As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!' He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, 'If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.' He said to him, 'Go in peace.'

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At first glance you may not think you have a lot in common with Naaman.

He had a mild case of leprosy.

He was an army commander.

He kept captives from the countries that he defeated to help him around the house.

He had his people carry around a treasure chest filled with silver and gold and fine linens.

Not exactly the kind of guy you would likely encounter at your friendly neighborhood bar-b-q.

Add to that, some of the customs we read about and some of the places we hear about in this story aren't overly familiar.

The King of Aram sends Naaman to the King of Israel with a request to cure him (based on the Israeli servant-girl's recommendation). Sounds innocent enough. But what the King of Aram was really saying to the King of Israel was this – “please cure my commander. And if you don't...well, let's just say it would be better for you and your people if you do.”

Then – running interference for the Israeli king, the prophet Elisha steps in to help. “Send the commander to me,” Elisha says. And when the Naaman comes to Elisha's house – with his silver, and his gold, and his horses, and his entourage – Elisha doesn't even go out to meet him. The nerve of those prophets...doesn't he know who he is dealing with?? Elisha sends his messenger to speak with Naaman. And the message is: wash in the Jordan river seven times.

The Jordan River is kind of like a long, shallow mud puddle. Naaman is used to the rivers of Syria. The Abana and the Pharpar are deep, wide, magnificent rivers. If the cure for his leprosy was to wash seven times in a river, he might as well hoof it back to Aram. Taking a dip in the river Jordan might actually make things worse.

But Naaman was desperate – so he did it. Seven times into the mud puddle. And when he emerged from the water that last time, his skin was clean.

I doubt anyone in this room or anyone watching this broadcast can really connect with Naaman’s bizarre experience so far.

But something that we might identify with is what happened to Naaman next. Because the real benefit of Naaman making that trip to Israel and going through the motions with Elisha had little to do with some kind of new-age treatment to cure his skin condition. What Naaman discovered is something that most of us have come to realize at some point or another: that this God of the Israelites (who is also the Father of Jesus Christ) is unlike any other god in our culture. Because only our God can deliver. And only our God can be trusted. And only our God truly loves.

“Now I know,” Naaman said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel...”

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Martin Luther once said that to have a god is nothing else than to believe and trust in something with your whole heart. Up to the point he met Elisha, Naaman had entrusted his heart to the King of Aram. And his military prowess. And his lofty place within the culture of the day. But when he was made clean he saw the truth. He knew that none of the other things that competed for his heart and his loyalty could measure up to the God Elisha worshipped.

In a lot of ways, Naaman’s story is so different than our own. Yet I hope we can identify with Naaman when it comes to this epiphany. I hope you have had a similar moment of clarity – when you really understood that the God we worship in Jesus Christ is the one, true God who deserves your whole heart and your complete and total devotion. That the God we worship – and the God who claims us by a sacrificial love – is...alone...worthy of praise. And that the other things we tend to worship – success, money, power – pale in comparison.

The trouble is – we don’t always live there...in that moment of clarity. We live in a world where lesser gods do compete for our loyalty. We

work in environments that demand that we prioritize the very things that compete for our hearts: success, money, power. All of us – no matter our job, our age or stage in life, our socioeconomic status, our political affiliation – all of us live in a world where we are faced with making compromises between the God we know to be true and the lesser gods that aren't.

Some of those compromises are small. Some are more obvious. Some of the compromises we make are easy to justify. Others end up haunting us.

None of us are immune from facing these compromises because all of us live in a world that is both beautiful and difficult; fallen and redeemed.

And as clear as Naaman was about the God that Elisha (and we) worship, he knew that he his life was back in Aram. Faith – and following God – is not about retreating and remaining in the place where things make sense...it is about trusting and following God in the places where things might be confusing. Because that's the world.

Even equipped with his new-found faith in the God we worship, Naaman had to return home – to his family, to his work, to his day-to-day. Naaman had to return to a world of compromises.

His king, the man who provided for Naaman and his family, worshipped a different god than the God of Israel. He worshipped at the House of Rimmon. Naaman knew that the time would come when he would have to escort his King to worship and would have to decide – standing there in front of that false god – whether he would be a good commander and bow down or whether he would make a scene and face the consequences.

Naaman knows he has to return and live in this kind of world – so he asks Elisha for something strange. He asks for two mule loads of dirt – dirt from the land that represented God's promise. Naaman might have to live in a world where multiple gods competed for his loyalty, but he didn't want to forget the truth. So he carried some of that truth with him.

The great southern writer Flannery O’Conner once said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.”

I’ll bet that when Naaman rode back into Aram carrying two mule loads worth of Israeli dirt he looked kind of odd. When he got home, the people that he knew may have even stopped him and said, “there’s something different about you, Naaman. You’ve changed.” And – one would hope – the choices that Naaman made after his encounter with the one, true God were different, too. Maybe even odd – from the vantage point of those who were used to worshipping the lesser gods of the culture.

As I read Naaman’s story, I’m encouraged by the fact that even in the life of a well-connected person who has managed to make his place in a world of compromises – God can still break through. That God can still transform.

Here, in this place, we don’t sprinkle dirt in our shoes to remind us of which God is true.

Here, we do it with water.

Today we sprinkled some on Logan, but I see still see some on you, and you, and you, and you...

It kind of makes us odd. Which is probably exactly the way God hopes we will be as we live and work and make decisions in a world that has yet to reflect the true potential of the one who created and saved it.

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