

The Healing of Naaman

This fall in our storytelling and sermons, we've been hopping around the Old Testament from Psalms to Kings to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and from Genesis to Exodus to Joshua. The stories have taken us to Israel, Egypt, and Babylon. We've witnessed celebration in the exodus and despair in the exile. We've taken time out to consider modern day idolatry. We've heard about MCC in general and specifically in Bolivia.

Today we return to the book of Kings with the story of Naaman found in 2 Kings 5.¹ This story takes place after the exodus, after the twelve tribes of Israel settled in the promised land, after Saul, David, and Solomon were kings over the nation of Israel, and after the united kingdom divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom continuing to be referred to as Israel and the southern kingdom taking the name of Judah.

The prophet Elisha, one of the main characters in the story, was Elijah's successor as prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. He came before Isaiah and Jeremiah who were active in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Two more main characters are the king of Aram (a country also known as Syria bordering Israel on the north) and the king of Israel who lives in the city of Samaria.

It's interesting to note that the prophet Elijah played a part in all three of these men's lives. According to 1 Kings 19, when Elijah fled Israel to escape the wrath of King Ahab he ended up on Mt Horeb where he encountered God. God told Elijah to travel back to Israel and then continue north to the desert of Damascus. There he was to anoint Hazael as Aram's king, Jehu as Israel's king, and Elisha to replace him as prophet. It's surprising to hear that God is involved in the line of succession in Syria as well as in Israel and Judah.

The surprise continues as we begin the story found in 2 Kings 5. *Naaman's master considered him an extraordinary man. He was the military commander of Aram's army, and he had won many important battles for Aram by the power of the LORD. Naturally he was greatly esteemed by his king. Naaman was a fierce warrior, but he also had a skin disease.*²

The surprise is that his victories in battle are attributed to the power of the LORD, to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Isn't Yahweh exclusive to Israel? Why would God give victory to one of their enemies, especially to one who leads raiding parties into Israel and takes prisoners? It's one of those prisoners, a servant to Naaman's wife, who provides the key to his healing.

Her suggestion for Naaman to consult the prophet in Samaria quickly moves from the lowest to the highest in Syria's social system – from Naaman's wife to Naaman to the king.

The King of Aram writes a letter to the King of Israel requesting healing for Naaman. Naaman arrives in Samaria with all the trappings of power and wealth. I imagine that along with the king's letter plus 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold and 10 sets of fine clothing, Naaman arrives in full uniform with a military contingent.

This is far beyond what the Israelite girl told him to do. No one ever said the king could cure him. Both Naaman and the king of Aram make assumptions about how things work – that things can only get done through avenues of power and wealth. The single most important piece of information about Elisha that the girl had communicated is completely lost in the process.

¹ Sources consulted for this sermon include: Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 109: Elisha Heals Naaman — Pulpit Fiction](#); Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary, [#510: Elijah Heals Naaman - Nov. 6, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 411 The Healing of Naaman \(1 Kings 5:1-15\) \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Richard Nelson, *Interpretation: First and Second Kings*, John Knox Press, 1987, pp. 178-183.

² 2 Kings 5:1, adapted from *The Voice*

The King of Israel responds with panic. He rips his clothing as a sign of his distress and says, “Who does he think I am—God? Why does Aram’s king think I have the power to kill and make alive again? What in the world makes him think that I can heal you of your disease? It is obvious that Aram’s king is trying to create trouble between us.”³

The King of Israel makes assumptions about how things work. He recognizes the power of God, but he doesn’t consult God. He seems unaware that Elisha can help with the problem. He can’t think of another way for this to happen if he can’t do it himself. And then he gets suspicious. He assumes this is some sort of pretext to start a conflict. After all, these two countries have a history of border skirmishes and raiding parties. But why would the other king send so much money as a way of picking a fight? And why would Naaman, with his history of leading raids against Israel, now show up in peace asking a favor?

Elisha, the man of God, hears about the king’s distress and sends a message to Israel’s king. “What has caused you to rip your clothing? Tell the man who has come to you for healing to come to me. Then he will be assured that a prophet lives in Israel.”⁴ Elisha knows that this is a spiritual issue, not a political one. He will take care of it.

The king is eager to relieve himself of responsibility. He tells Naaman to go find Elisha.

Now we see a power struggle between Naaman and Elisha. At least, that’s the way Naaman reacts. He comes to Elisha in all his glory, with horses and chariots, and Elisha doesn’t even come outside to meet him. Instead, Elisha sends out a messenger with instructions for Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan River seven times.⁵

Naaman had come to this house expecting something much different. He objects – strenuously. His first objection is egocentric. The prophet himself should have come out, greeted him, and personally healed him.⁶ His second objection is ethnocentric. The rivers in Aram are far superior to any river in Israel. Why should he bathe in an inferior river?⁷

He storms away in anger and doesn’t calm down until his servants approach him and speak to him with respect. “Father, if the prophet had told you to do some important thing, wouldn’t you have done what he asked? Why is it difficult for you to follow his instructions when he tells you, ‘Bathe yourself in the Jordan River, and be cleansed?’”⁸

Naaman relents and follows Elisha’s instructions. He washes himself in the Jordan River and is physically healed from his disease. Naaman also experiences an extraordinary spiritual reorientation. He returns to Elisha and declares, “I am convinced that there is no God who exists in the entire world like the True God in Israel.”⁹

This is where today’s scripture reading ends. However, if we read on through verse 19, we learn how he plans to live out this new belief in Israel’s God when he returns home. After offering Elisha a gift which Elisha refuses to accept, Naaman asks for two mule-loads of earth. He wants to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, and is concerned that he can only do this if he is standing on Israelite soil.

Next, he asks for assistance with a dilemma. He is subordinate to the king of Aram and knows he will be asked to accompany the king to the house of Aram’s god. He tries to make it plain that his loyalty is to his king, not to the king’s god. Is it possible for him to retain the high favor he has with the king while also honoring his new-found allegiance to the LORD God of Israel? He asks in advance for pardon for a compromise he knows is imperfect.

³ 2 Kings 5:7, *The Voice*

⁴ 2 Kings 5:8, *The Voice*

⁵ 2 Kings 5:10

⁶ 2 Kings 5:11

⁷ 2 Kings 5:12

⁸ 2 Kings 5:13, *The Voice*

⁹ 2 Kings 5:15, *The Voice*

Elisha's answer implies approval to this compromise. He wishes shalom for Naaman, "*Go, and be at peace about this matter.*"¹⁰

Perhaps this ending is unsatisfying. Perhaps we should have stopped at verse 15 as outlined in the Narrative Lectionary we're using this fall. Maybe Naaman should have said, "There is no God except Yahweh. I will never set foot in the house of Rimmon again no matter what the king will do to me." It seems reasonable to expect Elisha to give Naaman a definite answer – one that seems obvious. "You cannot worship Yahweh, the one true God, and still bow in the house of Rimmon."

But this isn't what happens. Elisha's answer neither approves nor judges but simply sends Naaman on his way to live his faith as best he can.

I wonder which part of this story has piqued your interest.

I wonder if you're surprised to learn that long before the coming of Jesus, there is evidence that God's providential care isn't limited to a chosen people in a particular place. Yahweh isn't exclusive to the Israelites – or to the United States or to any other country. Yahweh is the God of everyone, including Naaman, including us, including our enemies. Jesus ran into trouble when he used the story of Naaman in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4 to illustrate that the good news he was preaching extended beyond the religious and political borders of Israel.¹¹ Do we remember that God isn't exclusive to us, however we describe who "us" is?

I wonder if you're encouraged by the fact that God's blessings can't be controlled by splendor, social status, power, or wealth. God isn't transactional. Money, military might, and political power can't force God to act. Trusting, listening and being humble before God leads to the peace of God we desire.

I wonder what you learned about who to listen to when seeking help. In Naaman's story those who have power and social status repeatedly mess things up. The good news comes through lowly servants on both sides. Perhaps the biggest miracle in this story isn't the healing of Naaman. Perhaps the biggest miracle is the fact that people in power listen to people who don't have it. A word from God can come through unexpected people and in unexpected places through unexpected avenues. Godly wisdom is understanding the authenticity of who you're listening to instead of the power and cultural status of who you're listening to. I wonder when our expectation of how things should be has hindered our ability to experience the miraculous or even the ordinary blessing from God.

I wonder if you're questioning the relationship between blessing and belief. Naaman doesn't believe before he is healed. He thinks Elisha's instructions are ridiculous. He almost forfeits his healing because of his pride. On the other hand, we can name instances when faithful, godly people aren't healed from their diseases. But miracles don't solve all the world's ills. Jesus healed lepers, but he didn't get rid of leprosy. He calmed storms but he didn't cease all storms. Even in Jesus' time miracles were signs meant to increase faith. We don't know why some are cured and some not, but we do know that the healings that do happen – whether miraculous or through human agency – are meant to support our faith, to give us hope through God's power and promise.

I wonder what else you're wondering about.

In this story from 2 Kings, we find role reversal, shifting power, and the spreading of God's kingdom. This passage is about the breaking down of barriers and the beginning of new life. This story illustrates the complexities of human authority, politics, money, and perceived remedies. We learn that God's power is not centered in kings, wealth, protocols, and well-known rivers. In this story, God's healing comes by the suggestion of a young slave girl, the words of a lowly prophet, and the encouragement of servants.

Thanks be to God.

¹⁰ 2 Kings 5:19, *The Voice*

¹¹ Luke 4:14-30