

In the time of the kings, when the North and South were split into two, with Samaria serving as the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Jerusalem serving as the capital of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Naaman was commander of the armies of Aram, the area that we now know as Syria.

Naaman is good at what he does, held in high esteem by his own king, and even by his enemies; the passage tells us that they believe God had favoured Naaman in battle. He is a man of wealth, receiving a generous portion of the spoils of war, including a slave girl from Israel. He is what many - and what he himself - would consider a big deal.

Only Naaman - with all of this favour - suffers. He has what the scriptures call leprosy - which might have actually been leprosy, or what we know as Hansen's disease, which manifests as rashes or reddish skin patches. It might have been some other skin disease, too, like psoriasis or eczema. In any event, Naaman has a disease that shows itself on his skin - more than likely in a very visible place like his hands or his face.

By Gentile standards, he is not considered unclean, or ritually impure, but it is still a condition that most people in the ancient world regarded as highly contagious and best avoided. Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon on this same text writes descriptively of the frustration and embarrassment that Naaman might have felt with his skin condition, locating the condition on his hands:

“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 quickly away. He had learned the hard way about shaking hands. He found it was better to offer a slight bow with both hands clasped behind his back. That way he didn't have to watch the other person decide whether or not to be brave when he held out his scabby hand.”

With such favour shown to Naaman, why did he suffer so?

In the story, Naaman is slowly moved toward the water.

The unnamed slave girl, comes into the picture. One of the spoils of war, she mentions to Naaman's wife that there is a prophet in Samaria that she knows can heal him. So Naaman's wife dutifully passes along that information to him. Naaman goes with that information and asks a favour from his king, that he may go to Samaria. So with royal favour and royal letter in hand, Naaman heads off toward Samaria, taking with him some of his wealth - silver, gold, fabrics - just in case such a cure would cost much.

Naaman provides his royal letter to the king of Israel who reads it and anguishes so much over the request that he tears his own clothing. This king thinks the letter and request is a trap, given the history between the warring factions, given the fact that Aram's armies are stronger, and knowing he cannot cure this commander. His desperate question "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" is uttered because he believes it is a provocation for war. As one commentator put it, his words also come from a pious knowledge that healing can only come from God.

Such a public display of grief gets the attention of Elisha the prophet. He sends for Naaman to come, so that he may learn of a prophet in Israel. So Naaman comes to Elisha, this big deal of a commander riding up with horses and chariots. He waits outside of Elisha's house to be greeted by the great prophet. But no greeting comes. No prophet emerges. Only a messenger with a command.

Naaman is expecting to be greeted like the big deal that he is, with fuss and some sort of public act of great magic performed over him to cure him. Instead, Elisha doesn't even bother to come and meet him - he sends out a

messenger instead with a simple instruction: go and wash in the Jordan seven times.” That’s it. Go and wash. Seven times.

Naaman is incensed. He has been shown no hospitality, no cup of water, nothing. He doesn’t even get to meet the prophet. Instead, he’s told by some “gopher” that all he needs to do is wash seven times in that piddly river. Did he really need to come all this way? Could he not have washed in the great rivers of Damascus?

But again, the little deals in this story, those unnamed and lowly servants move Naaman to the water.

Using logic against Naaman’s pride and anger, his servants urge him to give it a try. It’s a simple thing that the prophet has said to do, they tell him. Just go to the water, wash and be clean. What can it hurt? To Naaman’s credit, or maybe more accurately because of his wretchedness, he listens to his servants. And very much like a kid playing in the water, this big deal of a military commander dips himself into the knee-high water of the Jordan, counting 1, 2, 3... up to seven. Seven times he immerses himself, feeling foolish and hopeful with every dunk. When he comes up from the water that seventh time, his skin is like that of a young boy’s.

He is clean. He is healed. He is free.

They bring Naaman to the water: the lowly slave girl taken in warfare; the common servants who plead for him to listen. They bring him to the water so that he can be made whole again.

In verse 15 of this story, which is not included in our lectionary text this morning, we hear this: “Then [Naaman] 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...” The words that the king

of Israel uttered about not being God, now becomes a part of Naaman's experience - healing can only come from God.

And this is an important point of the story: before Naaman emerged from the Jordan, he did not have knowledge of or faith in the God of Israel. But like most, if not all, people who are sick, he will do what it takes to find a cure, looking for a miracle no matter where it takes him. He is searching for Elisha, the prophet who will make him well, but instead what he encounters is the God who restores him through the word of the prophet and the water which holds the promise. In Naaman's case, the miracle in the waters of the Jordan, effects faith.

We hear so often the opposite view, even within our own scriptures: that if you have enough faith, the miracle will come. Just have enough faith and you will be made well. But here scripture tells us an alternative scenario: that Naaman, an outsider, a Gentile, did not believe that anything would come of this prophet and his command to wash himself seven times in that muddy river. All we know is that he was a desperate man seeking any solution to his predicament. Most of us can understand his despair. Many of us have lived it or are living it.

But faith comes to us not in predetermined ways and doesn't act in predetermined ways. Naaman, an outsider, was brought to the water by the unexpected actions of the lowly to the most unexpected of places, where he encountered God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of this God:

“God travels in wonderful ways with human beings, but does not comply with the view and opinions of people. God does not go the way people want to proscribe for him... and that is the wonder of all wonders... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them.”

In Naaman's story, God is acting in the smallest, most ordinary and unexpected of ways. Like the prophet Elisha, these nameless characters, slave girls and servants, also point to where God is at work and bring Naaman to the healing waters.

Is it not so for us as well? We too were moved toward the water. Most of us as infants, in our Lutheran and Anglican traditions, but some of us as adults, or others as younger people, as my own children were.

Whatever our own circumstances, we too were brought to the font, this ordinary yet miraculous water, by the actions, the faith, and the hope of others. Faith wasn't a requirement for you or I to get here, certainly not for those of us who were baptized as babies. We were brought. By family that loved us enough to bring us and by a community lovingly accepting us and nurturing us.

Faith in the God that moves in unexpected ways - to outsiders and big deals, to slaves girls and servants - comes in relationship to one another. In relationship with one another and with God who calls us together, we learn to trust that something happens here for us in this bowl of water. Not because of some great public display of magic; not because of some great faith on our part, not because of our own worthiness or unworthiness, but because common people in their own journeys with the God of grace brought us here.

So whether with a quick dip under or a sprinkling across the forehead, whether you chose it or someone else chose it for you, wonder of all wonders, you too have been moved to the waters of grace - waters which always contain God's promise: you are clean, you are healed, you are free.

Amen.