

After David and Solomon, the kings became increasingly more self-interested and less faithful, worshipping other gods and engaging in economic and social practices that were harmful to the community. As I mentioned last week, Israel split into two kingdoms: Northern kingdom, made up of the land of ten of the tribes, with the capital in Samaria, and Southern kingdom of Judah, made up of the land of two tribes, with the capital in Jerusalem. Each kingdom had their own kings who were mostly not good, with the occasional bright spot among them. God sent prophets to speak to the kings and the people, to try to bring them back to God's way. Other prophets were in the royal court, paid to give the king the news he wanted to hear from the divine realms. In today's story we hear about the prophet, Elisha, who was decidedly not welcome in the royal court, but who did have power from God. He lived and worked in the northern kingdom of Israel, which was particularly politically unstable. **READ.** 2 Kings 5:1-15.

I'm uncomfortable with healing stories in the Bible. There, I said it. Some of my colleagues dropped this text like it was hot today because of how uncomfortable it can be to preach, especially on All Saints. It's not that I don't like healing or that I don't believe in a God who heals. Because I do believe in a God who heals. It's just when it comes to healing, we usually think of physical healing and not everyone physically heals. We may have witnessed a healing of one in our midst and yet there are some here who have lost a loved one to cancer or other horrific diseases. When I was a chaplain in the hospital, I quickly learned that healing may not always be

physical. Healing can be spiritual/ emotional, or relational. It's not always an either/or. Healing can come in many forms- both seen and unseen. Diseases and illnesses are awful and many of them happen for reasons unknown, and I believe that God's heart is the first to break with news of people suffering from disease or illness, as well as many other things. Diseases and illnesses leave folks tired, afraid, and vulnerable....maybe like Naaman found himself in today's biblical story?

Naaman was the general- the commander of the Syrian army, a mighty warrior, a much revered and decorated soldier. He was not just a military powerhouse but also a politician. He was a powerful man. Naaman was not a local guy but a **foreigner**. Not just a foreigner but an **enemy** and **conqueror** to the people of Israel. Naaman was also a pagan. He worshiped other gods. And yet, we're told that the Lord had given him great victory to Aram (which we now know as Syria). This strong commander of the Syrian army also had leprosy or a skin disease or some sort. In the days in which this story was written, leprosy was well known and those who had it were considered to be unclean, social outcasts. Leprosy barred those who had it from the synagogue and from public events- at least those who observed purity laws. I would imagine that Naaman had to make a lot of public appearances as the commander of the Syrian Army, and I also imagine it would be hard just to look in the mirror let alone to have people looking at you while wearing their judgmental and pity glances on their faces. There was no hiding leprosy. The text doesn't reveal how many unsuccessful treatments that Naaman had previously

sought out to cure his leprosy. We don't know. We do know that this great warrior was being defeated by a body covered with leprosy and was desperately seeking a cure. I'm guessing most of us have never had leprosy; nonetheless, as my OT professor says, "leprosy in the Bible becomes a metaphor for all kinds of diseases and malfunctions. These are some of the things that might look like leprosy today: those who suffer from addiction that has power over them, those who are in a failing marriage, those who have a broken relationship with a child or parent, those who made poor investments and are very close to the edge, those that make bad choices that seem to spiral out of control" (WB, *The Song of an Ex-Leper*, p. 332). Leprosy can be so overwhelming that it overshadows an individual. It can also overshadow a nation: such as the leprosy of "hate and brutality and violence and mass shootings and race and poverty" (WB, p. 332).

Entering into today's story- the often over-looked Israelite slave girl- the one who was captured by Naaman's people, and given to Naaman's wife to be her maidservant. It was this unnamed Israelite slave girl, who INVITES Naaman (through her mistress) to go to her homeland in Samaria and see the prophet who could cure him. This young, unnamed girl, who is deemed as powerless, has a story to tell and an invitation for Naaman. She knows the way to his healing through the God of Israel. Considering that she was kidnapped and enslaved, one may think she would be bitter and not offer any information that would help Naaman or any of the Arameans, who were her enemies. But she takes the high road. Maybe she senses

Naaman's desperation? And for some reason, Naaman, the powerful yet desperate warrior- who more than likely had been everywhere, tried almost everything, decides to listen to his wife's maidservant and go to enemy territory to see this prophet about a cure. That is definitely God at work because how else would the commander of the Syrian army listen to an Israelite slave girl! This slave girl is a powerful vessel for God!

Although Naaman listened to this girl, he assumed that this prophet of whom she spoke would be found in the King of Israel's court because obviously that is where all the important, powerful people hang out. So...Naaman, seeking help, goes through the proper channels of power to get himself an appointment with the prophet, so he thinks. Therefore, he heads to see the king of Israel who surely knows of this prophet if the slave girl did. In preparation for Naaman's trip, the King of Aram writes the king of Israel a letter asking for Naaman to be cured. Now Damascus, where Naaman lived, was a good distance Northwest from Samaria, where Elisha resided. And though the distance wasn't that great, the barriers of foreigner, warrior and enemy were. When Naaman reached the courts of the King of Israel, he handed him the letter. The King of Israel, upon reading the letter, began to panic and tore his clothes. You don't have to know much about the Bible to know that a king tearing his clothes is never a good thing. Tearing of the clothes was usually the indication of grief or righteous indignation or sometimes, in the case of a king, it meant the giving up of authority. The king of Israel is quite upset that he isn't God- who gives life or death- and therefore can't cure Naaman of leprosy. He

knows only of political power. What a ridiculous and impossible request! Why would someone expect him to cure leprosy? Surely, the king of Aram must be picking a fight with him!

Well somehow word of the king's behavior got back to Elisha, the prophet, and he sent a message to the king to send Naaman on over to his house in order that Naaman *learn that there is a prophet in Israel*. So Naaman, along with his horses and chariots, went to Elisha's house, as the king must have given him directions. I imagine it was quite the traffic jam on those long, dirt roads, and I'm sure Elisha's neighbors were all abuzz about this foreigner coming to see him along with his entourage. Being a southerner, one would expect to be greeted with some sweet tea and some cookies. But not Elisha. Naaman arrives- I would imagine exhausted and vulnerable - desperately seeking a cure for his illness. And when he arrives at the great prophet's house, Elisha doesn't even open the door. He sends his messenger out with a simple instruction for Naaman. "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Really? I wonder if that sounded a little like "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning" (WB, p. 331). Naaman was angry and probably devastated that he had come all this way- gone to all these lengths- for what?- a dip in a dirty, shallow river, and he throws a fit before God and everybody! He wanted the royal treatment. Couldn't Elisha just wave his hand over me and I'm healed? Doesn't he know who I am? And how dare he suggest that nasty, muddy, puny river Jordan when we've got way better rivers back home in Damascus. Naaman's stubbornness almost got in the

way of his healing- none of us know anything about that. But then Naaman's servants, who are also vessels of God, take a risk and approach their master. Isn't it always interesting whom God chooses to be vessels? Even though they're servants, it doesn't stop them from ever so gently yet right in Naaman's face, calling him out and challenging him. So desperate- been there tried almost everything- Naaman humbled himself and did what Elisha suggested, and he came out of the water, after 7 dips, changed in more ways than just his skin. He was restored...healed...made whole. He now knows that "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (v. 15).

Upon hearing this story, most people would focus on the great pagan warrior turned believer, Naaman, who succumbed to humility and obedience and did what God's holy man had instructed him and was healed. I get it. And yet, Naaman's miracle is not about Naaman, nor Elisha, but about the unrivaled oneness of the God of Israel. God uses the obedient Israelite slave girl with the one-liner to model obedience and humility. She is in the good company of three other women called "girls" who explicitly use their voices in the Old Testament: Rebekah: a Matriarch (Gen. 24), Ruth: the Great Grandmother of King David (2), and Esther: a Queen (2). Although this girl was deemed powerless by society, without her obedience to the God of Israel, Naaman may never have been cured. He may never have found his way to wholeness nor to believe in the power of God. This slave girl more than likely knew nothing of military or political powers, but she knew something about the mysterious yet healing and redeeming power of God. It was out of her courage and obedience to God-

to love her enemy- to risk speaking up on his good behalf- that Naaman's healing happened- that new creation began in him. Talk about uncomfortable? Most people would call him enemy and stop right there. But it's as if she knew that God called him a saint, worthy of mercy and healing. Look what happened to Jesus when he was preaching in his own hometown. In Luke's Gospel, we're told that Jesus uses the example of Naaman's healing- a foreigner and an enemy, in his sermon and the people listening to Jesus become outraged and tried to throw him off a cliff (4:27)! This kind of obedience to living God's command to love neighbor and enemy alike is uncomfortable and hard, and it may just be a vessel to heal modern-day leprosy. For the God of grace is not yet finished with the healing work in the world. And, gathered saints, neither are we" (WB, p. 335)! Therefore, let us listen and obey. Amen.