

"Spiritual Healing"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
2/16/03

TROUBLE COMES TO NAAMAN

Naaman had it all. He was "commander of the army of the king of Aram." Few people ever rise to such a position of power. Furthermore, the Scripture tells us that he was a "great man" and a "valiant soldier." He had the confidence of the king and the confidence of the people.

But, we learn in our story for today that there was chink in Naaman's armor. Yes, he was a great man and a valiant soldier but he was ill. He had leprosy.

Many commentators say that leprosy in biblical times was perhaps equivalent to the AIDS epidemic in our times. It was a disease which could take away everything family, friends, job. No matter how powerful or courageous the person, this disease had the potential to destroy a person's life. Many lepers were forced out of the cities into quarantined camps.

Because Naaman still held his post, maybe he had a mild form of the disease, or maybe it was still in the early stages. At any rate, his life would be tragically shortened by his disease. All of Naaman's great accomplishments were colored by this terrible bit of luck. His future which once seemed so bright now had a dark cloud hanging over it.

WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME?

Surely Naaman must have asked himself the questions that some of us have asked at one time or another, "Why did this have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?"

There were no answers to those questions. There never are at least right away. And so Naaman was a man whose confidence was shaken. He was once the strongest of the strong, but now that life seemed like only a memory.

Is your life colored by the intrusion of something unwanted and unexpected? It may be a terrible disease like Naaman's. It may be deep sorrow. It may be a loved one who disappoints you terribly. It may be a rebellious child.

"Dis-ease" comes in many forms, but it is present in every life.

No matter how good you may look to others on the outside you know the truth ... even if everyone else misses it. The "leprosy" may not be visible for all to see, but you know it's there. I think all of us need to be healed in one way or another, and I also think that today's story points the way to healing spiritual as well as physical.

In the Bible disease is not always a curse and a position of power is not always a blessing. You have to wait until the end of the story to know for sure. I would suggest that the same is true for us. Our life stories are always complex. Just like the story of Naaman our lives are filled with success and misfortune, faith and doubt.

And, just as it was in Naaman's story, sometimes the person who makes the greatest impact upon our life is the one we would least expect.

WILLING TO LISTEN TO ANYONE

Naaman was at the end of his rope. After going to the best doctors money could buy ... after trying alternative medicine and medicine men Naaman and his wife were desperate. They knew that didn't have much time. They were willing to go anywhere or try anything in order to be cured of this dreadful disease.

Some of you may remember when the famous actor, Steve McQueen went to Mexico and tried an unproven drug to cure his cancer. He even went on TV (looking awful I might add) and promoted that quack's clinic right before he died.

That was Naaman. Naaman would go anywhere. Naaman would try anything. He was that desperate. Because of his illness Naaman and his wife began to listen to people that they normally wouldn't have heard. In particular, they listened to a young servant girl from Israel.

In contrast to Naaman, she was a person who had no power. She had been captured by Naaman's own troops on a raid and now spent all her days serving Naaman's wife. But, now this little servant girl had something to say, and big, powerful Naaman and his wife were willing to listen.

Isn't it strange how our perspective can be dramatically altered when some big tragedy comes into our life? Some people and things that once worried us to no end don't seem important at all, and some people and things that we hardly noticed before now become the most important of all.

We don't know from the Scripture what happened to this little servant girl who was captured from the nation of Israel. But, I have to wonder if she didn't become more than just a servant girl after this incident ... more like a beloved member of the family. After all, it was this lowly servant girl who told the commander of the army of Aram how to be saved. She said, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 2 Kings 5:3

LOOKING FOR CURES IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Naaman, desperate as he was for a cure, decided to try what his servant girl suggested. But, Naaman still hadn't caught on to the idea that God chooses to send his salvation through the weak and lowly instead of the strong and powerful. So he decides to seek

salvation in the way that he sought it before ... by going right to the top. Naaman goes to the king of Aram, tells him what he has learned from his servant girl and asks for his help.

The king is happy to oblige. He too figures that if such healing is available, it must be found in the halls of power. So he sent Naaman on his way to the king of Israel with gifts ... many gifts silver, gold and ten sets of really nice custom made Brooks Brother's suits. In addition to the gifts, the king also sent a letter. It said simply,

"I am sending you my servant Naaman so that you can cure him of leprosy."

But, the king of Israel was not impressed with the gold or the fancy suits. He saw a more sinister motive in the visit. He said something like,

"Oh sure. Tell me to heal your servant of leprosy. Why don't you just tell me to fly him to the moon or raise somebody from the dead? Who do you think I am? God? I know what you're trying to do. Those raids were just the beginning. Now you're looking for an excuse to start a full scale war."

And so the king of Israel felt powerless to do anything.
He tore his robes in despair.

Notice how all the supposedly powerful people in this story don't really have any power at all. Naaman, the great war hero and commander of the army of Aram has no power in the face of his illness. The king of Aram despite all his wealth and power can't buy a cure for his general, and the king of Israel is a basket case!

ELISHA SENDS WORD

But, into this almost comedic situation of failed power and politics, there comes a word from God through the prophet, Elisha. Elisha after hearing of the king of Israel's foolish display sends word that the power and promise of God are still alive in Israel.

He tells the king, "Okay 'king,' you can quit groveling now.
Have the man come to me and I'll make him whole.
He will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

So once again we see the powerful and the mighty coming to the doorstep of the humble for healing. Naaman makes a beeline for the prophet's house. Can't you just hear the rumble and see the impressive cloud of dust as Naaman and his entourage come clamoring up to the prophet's home. (The equivalent today might be a whole fleet of stretch limousines driving up to a humble home in the country.)

Well, after the dust cleared and the horses were settled down, Naaman, a man who was obviously used to giving orders receives a shock.

Naaman is given an order ... not from the prophet Elisha but from Elisha's servant, Gehazi.

The servant's message?

“Go wash yourself in the Jordan river seven times, and your leprosy will be cleansed.”

AN ANGRY COMMANDER

Now by this time Naaman is really getting tired of the run around from all these little people.

Naaman screams as only a commander can scream so that he's sure the prophet can hear, "Now I thought a prophet could figure out that he was dealing with an important person just by the brand of war chariots that I drove to his house. I thought that at the very least he would come out, wave his magic wand, call on the name of his Lord, do his little dance ... or whatever and hopefully cure me.

But, no. He tells me to go wash seven times in that muddy Jordan river. Well, if it were only a matter of soap and water, I would have been healed already. We've got rivers in Damascus that are a whole lot cleaner than this muddy Jordan."

And with that, Naaman drove off in a rage.

HEALING IN A DIFFERENT PLACE

Sometimes I wonder if we don't think of God and God's prophets in the same way that Naaman did. God is someone to be summoned to do our bidding heal us on our own terms ... in the place where we are.

But, I have learned that it almost never happens that way. In order to be healed, we have to travel to a different place. In order to be healed, we have to dip ourselves not in the cool, clean waters of home but in the cold, muddy waters of the Jordan.

It seems like such a simple thing to do ... to allow ourselves to be baptized in such a way. But, like Naaman, even in our sickness we still resist. We still cling to the illusion that we are in charge of the forces of heaven as we are in charge of the forces of earth. We too become angry when things don't go the way we think they should ... when we can't wave a magic wand over our problems and make them go away.

But, perhaps God needs to teach us the same lesson that God taught Naaman so long ago. Quite often salvation doesn't come in the form that we expect. Quite often salvation comes in the form of a servant and an unwanted baptism in the muddy Jordan River.

TOO SIMPLE A CURE

The great golf pro, Harvey Pennick told of a woman who came to him for lessons. She was a good player who wanted to improve even more. Harvey told her only one thing ... something that he often told his pupils because he knew it worked.

“Clip off the top of the tee as you swing through, and I will show you a good shot.”

The woman did as she was asked hitting one good shot after another, but Harvey could see that she was not happy. She said, “I want to know why this works. Why does trying to clip off the tee cause my shots to go like I want them to?”

Harvey replied, “Because when you clip off the tee, you square the clubface. It’s natural.”

This was not what the woman wanted to hear. She said as she left, “You make it sound too easy. My husband is the one you ought to be teaching. He’s dumb enough to understand you. What do I owe you for the lesson?”

Harvey replied, “Nothing. How could I ever charge you for not helping you?”
The lady replied, “This is embarrassing. I must pay you for your time.”

Harvey said that she left angry because he wouldn’t take her money. He concluded, “There’s just no pleasing some people.”

SIMPLE SALVATION

Naaman’s problem with Elisha was akin to the problem this woman had with Harvey’s teaching. It just sounded too simple, too easy. Naaman dismissed it in a rage because it seemed like an insult instead of a cure. Who was this prophet to tell him through some servant to go down to the Jordan River and bath seven times?

Some people say the same thing when I tell them about God’s offer of salvation and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It just sounds too easy. Somehow it just doesn’t seem like a significant thing to do to believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus as an outward sign of what Calvin called an “inward and spiritual work.” But, that is the requirement simple as it may seem for eternal life.

Why do we find that simple cure so hard to take?

For the same reason that Naaman found his cure so hard to take.

It requires humility. It requires us to come down off of our “high horse” and wash ourselves clean in the waters of God’s grace.

Fortunately for Naaman he had some servants who cared enough about him to turn him back toward the waters of the Jordan. They said,

"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'?"

2 Kings 5:13 (NRSV)

So Naaman did as the prophet commanded, and he was healed. In fact the Scripture tells us that he was more than healed. His skin was like that of a young boy. He was given a whole new life.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Let me tell you ... as Paul Harvey would put it ... the rest of the story. Naaman was not only healed in body. He was also healed in soul as well. He believed that the God of Israel was the one true God, and he committed himself to serving the one true God all the days of his life. He even took home several baskets of Israeli dirt as a sign of his new commitment! (See 2 Kings 5:15-19)

What about us? What will the rest of the story be for us? Will we consent to God's baptism by water and the Spirit in Jesus Christ? Will we have the humility to accept God's cure? Will we see the need to be healed spiritually as well as physically?

Or will we continue to drive off in a rage trying to make it on our own and thinking that the way of the world is the only way?

THE JOURNEY TOWARD HEALING

I believe that all of us are on a journey that can lead to healing. But, the journey toward wholeness and healing is a winding and difficult trip.

Patricia Fraser wrote this about healing,
"The journey toward healing is not an easy one. The first step is recognizing what is holding you back and naming it. The second step, often a long and arduous one, is letting go ... We are called to let go of our hurts, as well as our sins.

In order to let go, we have to look into the closets of our pain and sort through them. Once we see what is holding us back, we need to let go of it. We can offer it to God who is powerful enough to bear it for us. Letting go frees us to move ahead, to grasp something new, to allow God to heal and transform our pain into something beautiful.

This doesn't always mean that our circumstances change, but that our hearts become soft and open to love and grace. Remember, God cannot place forgiveness and mercy into hands that are already full."

Are your hands already full?

Perhaps, like Naaman, your hands are full of a sense of your own importance?
Perhaps your hands are so full of daily activities that you have no time to think about what is really important? Perhaps your hands are full of anger at what someone else has done for you? Perhaps your hands are full of fear?

Whatever fills your hands, like Naaman had to do long ago, you have to let it go. You have to let go of your pride and let God do what only God can do restore and renew your life.

Long ago a man named Naaman let go of his pride and listened to God's servant. He was healed. Somewhere, somehow you and I are being called to take that same step.

Amen.