

Prophets Series #4
2 Kings 5:1-19

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Elisha & Naaman

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."

Naaman 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 Naaman returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before Elisha 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 Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" Naaman 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."

Elisha said to him, "Go in peace."

There's a store down at Ridgedale that is a favorite of two members of my family. It's called "Build a Bear". You go in, pick out the body of the bear or animal you want, stuff it, and provide it with a variety of clothes and accessories to make it your very own.

It occurs to me that a "Build a God" store might also be popular. If that were possible, what kind of characteristics would we want God to have? If we are honest with ourselves, I think we have to admit that we would like God to be a tame God. Sure we want God to be almighty and awe-inspiring, but mostly we want a God we can easily and comfortably believe in, worship, and explain. We like a God that comforts us when we are fearful, inspires us to do great things, and loves us unconditionally (and God certainly does all that), but we also like a God who doesn't pester us and most of the time can be properly ignored until we have a need to call on him. We like a predictable God, a God who will act according to our expectations of what is just and right.

The God who is described in the account of Elisha and Naaman is probably not the God we would build for ourselves. This God is certainly not predictable, and for that reason this account raises questions about God and how God acts in the world that may make us uncomfortable.

This is a puzzling story from the very beginning. Naaman commands the army of the King of Aram (Aram being in that portion of territory north of Israel which today we call Syria), and he is considered an excellent general, a Patton or Eisenhower type of a general, because he has proved victorious in battle against, among others, the people of Israel. Why has he won? The text says he has been successful because the LORD God of Israel, the God one would think should be siding with the people of Israel, God's chosen people, has given Naaman and the army of Aram the victory. God being on the side of the enemy? That's not what we expect. Ah, but we know that God sometimes works in mysterious ways, so maybe the LORD God plans to make things right by having the mighty Naaman fall victim to dreaded leprosy. Naaman's disease has obviously not barred him from social interaction, which suggests he has a mild form of leprosy, but he is still doomed to a life of embarrassing and disfiguring affliction.

Yet the story now takes another odd twist. A young Israelite girl captured by Naaman's army when they were defeating the army of Israel serves Naaman's wife, and this servant girl bursts out to her mistress with concern for this man who is ultimately responsible for her captivity, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." The wife communicates this word to Naaman, and he then shares the information with his king.

Now the king needs this general, this capable commander of his battles with Israel. If healing is to be found in Israel, why then, he tells Naaman, “By all means, go.” Yes, go, go to the people you have conquered, and get them to help you. He sends with Naaman a letter requesting that the king of Israel cure Naaman’s leprosy, along with a great gift of silver and gold and rich clothing. The king of Aram doesn’t really know what he’s doing; he knows nothing about the God of Israel and the means the Israelite king may use to bring healing to Naaman. He simply assumes that in Israel, as in Aram, kings control everything, including knowing who has the power needed to cure someone. So he does the right thing but for all the wrong reasons.

When the king of Israel receives the letter, he thoroughly misinterprets the whole affair and panics. An enemy ruler requesting he cure the leprosy of an enemy soldier? It must be a devious, dastardly trick! Healing Naaman isn’t the point at all. What the king of Aram is really trying to do is to provoke a fight so he can justify some further aggression against Israel. Nevertheless, inept though he is, the king of Israel unwittingly furthers Naaman’s cause, because Elisha hears that the king is panic-stricken and offers to help.

Elisha sends word to Naaman suggesting Naaman come to his house, and Naaman responds as any proper general would, showing up with an entourage of horses and chariots. Naaman no doubt assumes that for such an important person as himself, this prophet will surely drop whatever he is doing and respectfully rush out and heal him.

But no. Elisha just stays in his house and sends a messenger out to say, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan River, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” Naaman goes off in a huff, not used to being publicly embarrassed by being addressed by a lowly servant. In the first place, Naaman grumbles, one would have thought all that was needed for the healing was for Elisha to call on the LORD God and say the proper prayer to cure the leprosy, maybe even jazz it up a bit with a special ointment or a ritual dance. Even if a seven-fold dip in a river was all that was necessary, Elijah could have at least recognized that it would be better to do it in one of the clear, clean, lovely rivers of Damascus, rather than the sluggish muddy waters of the Jordan!

Naaman wants divine healing, but the LORD God and his prophet are not meeting his expectations. Naaman expects a proper healing ceremony, one with a touch of grace and class as befits his stature, and all he is getting is a remarkably irritating and demeaning run around from a God who refuses to be tamed to his expectations. Then, once again from unexpected quarters, from Naaman’s lowly servants, comes the suggestion that if Elisha had told him he must do something difficult or humbling, like push a pebble with his nose all the way back to Aram or climb up Mount Carmel backwards, he certainly would have tried doing that, so what harm could it do to simply get wet in a river, even if it is a little muddy? Why not try it, at least?

“So Naaman 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.” The LORD God has not acted as Naaman’s “Build a God” was expected to act, but the LORD God is not limited by Naaman’s expectations. A motley assortment of people have participated. Kings, slave girls, and servants, mostly in ignorance, making their own free and unpredictable moves each step of the way, have been woven by God into the web of events leading to Naaman’s healing. And Naaman, reluctantly, doubtfully, not understanding, has nevertheless obeyed the word of the LORD as spoken through his prophet.

Now Naaman, his flesh healed and his spirit chastened and mellowed, returns to Elisha to declare that he now knows the only God in all the world is Israel's God. One would at this point expect Naaman to give a stirring repudiation of all his former pagan and idolatrous ways, particularly since this story is part of the book of Kings, which makes the point over and over again that the God of Israel is a jealous God who demands that Israel worship the LORD with total commitment and exorcise all traces of foreign influence. But Naaman doesn't totally renounce his pagan ways. Instead, he demonstrates his cultural conditioning, which predisposes him to see gods as tied to particular areas of land, so that even as he exalts the LORD God of Israel as the God of all earth, he still wants to cart two tons of Israelite soil, to which he apparently thinks the LORD is specially bound, back to Aram as an aid to his proper worship of the LORD God.

Then he makes a surprising request of Elisha:

"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, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count."

Naaman is asking that the prophet recognize the realities he will face back in Aram, where, as the highly regarded and trusted general of the king he will be expected to show respect while the king worships Rimmon, the storm god of Damascus and the equivalent of the Caananite god, Baal.

Surely Elisha will now lecture Naaman on orthodox theology and admonish him that the First Commandment says "I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods." If Naaman is not going to go all the way with God, he can forget the whole thing. The purity of Israelite worship must be maintained! In addition to calling down judgment on Naaman for these corrupt worship practices, surely Elisha will also demand that Naaman end the powerful, violent military career from within which he has fought the battles against Israel. Surely, Elisha will now tie up these disturbing loose ends.

What does Elisha in fact do? He says to Naaman, "Go in peace." "Go in peace," says the prophet of the Lord to this man torn between the ideals of his new faith and the realities of his old life. Now just because "Go in peace" are the key words in this situation, we need not see them as blasting apart the Bible's view of the people of Israel being God's chosen people, its calls for undivided worship of the one true God, and its pleading for peace, for justice, for the undoing of the proud and mighty. But such unexpected words from Elisha should give us pause lest we make idols of such concerns through which we claim to have captured God and truth. "Go in peace," says the prophet to Naaman and other people we may be quick to judge and dismiss when we make idols of our limited understandings.

"Go in peace." The words swirl in the air surrounding Naaman and surrounding us, telling us our God is not a tame God. We can grasp at God through our theologies of peace, hope, liberation, grace, or personal salvation through Christ. But always we know God only in part. Always God rises unexpectedly and surprisingly above us just when we think we have pinned him down. God is not a cuddly bear to be stuffed and dressed and admired. God is, finally, as we see in Jesus, a God of joy and love, but God is also one whose ways remain partly mysterious and unknowable, and before whom we do well to bow with fear and humility as he touches and moves our lives in ways our containers of theology and doctrine are too small and fragile to hold.