



Made Whole by the Word

2 Kings 5:1-14

February 12, 2006

I remember reading this story of the servant girl and Naaman when I was a boy. In fact I have here the Bible I read as a child, and here by the story of Naaman is a beautiful illustration of the story. There on the right is the servant girl, standing and saying, "Would to God that my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria!" Opposite the girl on the left is Naaman's wife, standing very concerned. And in between the girl and the wife is Naaman, a large, imposing man, a mighty warrior. But of the three in the picture, he is the only one seated, for he is weak with leprosy.

The girl is telling them about the prophet in her home country, the prophet who speaks the word of God who has power to heal. So Naaman goes to the prophet Elisha, who tells him to wash seven times in the river Jordan. And Naaman comes home healed, to the delight of his family and this servant girl. It's a great story for boys and girls, this story with this spunky young girl. Shirley Temple could have played her perfectly. I imagine the story ending with a close-up of the servant girl's face beaming that Shirley Temple smile. The End. A great children's story.

But I realize this is a very adult story, a complicated story with layers of meaning, even international intrigue. She is called a "servant girl" but that does not tell the full story. This girl is a slave, a refugee who was kidnapped from her family and stolen from her land by a military raiding party. Her parents are probably dead now, lying face down in the smoking ruins of their village. And now she will spend the rest of her life serving the general who had them killed. To adult ears, the girl's story is full of tragedy and pain.

I also see Naaman in a very different way now. It turns out that Naaman is the commander of the Syrian army, the same army that had recently defeated Israel at the battle of Ramoth Gilead. There Naaman's army killed Israel's King Ahab. So the very idea of General Naaman returning to Israel would be like Osama bin Laden paying a visit to Manhattan.

But Naaman was so desperate he was willing to go anyway, because of his leprosy. In a child's world, leprosy might simply be a bad rash. But in the adult world, leprosy meant terrifying disfigurement -- possibly death. So Naaman went to his king and obtained a diplomatic letter to deliver to the new king of Israel, who was none other than the late Ahab's son Jehoram.

Now put yourself in the shoes of that new King of Israel. Your mortal enemy General Naaman, who killed your father, brings you a letter from the King of Syria that

reads, “I have sent to you my servant Naaman that you may cure him of his leprosy.” There’s no way you can cure him -- you’re not God – so what can this letter be other than a trap? When Naaman is not cured, he will return to Syria for his whole army, and then return in force to kill you, like he killed your father. Thank goodness for the prophet Elisha, who shows up and says “Send Naaman to me.”

Now put yourself in the sandals of Naaman going to Elisha. You and your company of men arrive in your military convoy at Elisha’s door. This is the moment you’ve been waiting for, when Elisha will come out to you, and call on the name of his god, and wave his hand over your diseased skin -- and then you will be cured.

But that is not at all what happens. You pull up in your chariots, but Elisha won’t even pay you the courtesy of coming to the door. He sends an underling to you with some humiliating prescription for you to go wash in the Jordan River seven times. You become so filled with rage, so livid that all you can do is mount up and give your convoy the order to pull out. Now this is beginning to get ugly. Now this is going to turn into an international incident, maybe even war.

But as the convoy picks up speed toward home, your lieutenants appeal to your wounded pride. “General sir, if the prophet had told you to do something hard, like climb a mountain or swim the Sea of Galilee, wouldn’t you have done that? So why not do this simple thing? What do you have to lose? We have to cross the Jordan to get home anyway.” By the time the convoy reaches that puny creek of a river, you have cooled down, and you command the convoy to stop. You get out and go down into the river. And there, in that same river where future generations will come for baptism, you discover that you have become a new man in a new skin. You realize that you have been made whole by the word of that prophet’s God!

This could have been an ugly story of international plotting and conflict. But it turns into a story of the power of the word of God to heal. This is a story of healing.

When I read this as a boy, I knew it was a healing story. But now that I read this as an adult, I see healing with different eyes. Now I’m a pastor who has been embarrassed every time I turn on the TV and see so-called evangelists cheapen the healing power of God by selling it on TV. Now I remember all those times that I have sat by the bedside of people in mortal illness. I remember praying for them, praying frankly and openly for their healing. I remember how some of those people were indeed healed, sometimes in ways beyond the power of medicine to explain. But I also remember how some of those people died, leaving me to wonder if the healing that God had in store for them was the healing of resurrection beyond death.

The story of Naaman is a story of the power of the word of God to heal. But how does a 21st century Christian adult speak honestly about that power? Do we say that it’s just a children’s story? Or is it possible for adults to rediscover a childlike trust in God’s power?

Here's how I wrestle with that. First, I remember that not every leper was healed by Elisha in that generation. Nor was every leper healed in Jesus' time. But the healings they did perform were meant to be signs hope for all lepers someday.

Let's put this another way. You and I live in between what I call the "already," and what I call the "not yet." Already, we have begun to see the signs of God's healing power among us. We have seen it in the healing of Naaman. Especially we have seen it in the healings of Jesus. Those healings did not happen for everyone, but they were signs of what God would ultimately do for everyone.

The time when God's healing power flows out for everyone has not come yet. That time is in the realm of the "not yet." But "already" we see signs that it is coming. So you and I live between the already and the not yet. The Kingdom of God is NOT YET fully here, but ALREADY we see the signs of its coming. We see the signs in Jesus' acts of healing; they are meant to be an unmistakable sign; you can tell that by the way Jesus talks about them. Once when a leper came to Jesus, the leper said, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus answered, "I DO choose. Be made clean!" (Mark 1:40-45) Jesus' choice for that one man was a promise of God's ultimate will for everyone.

Between the "already" and the "not yet," we trust in the power of God's word to heal us of all our diseases someday, to straighten out everything that disfigures us inside and out. And whenever healing comes to us this side of heaven, it comes not by showy and loud and dramatic holy men. Rather, it comes by simple acts of obedience when we submit to God's script and not our own. That's how it happened for Naaman. That's how it happens still. And one day, we trust, all of us will be able to sing the same words a psalmist sang:

I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.
O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol.

Weeping may linger for the night,
But joy comes with the morning.

You have turned my mourning into dancing
You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.
(Psalm 30 Selected verses)

This is a story of healing by the power of the Word of God. I once heard this as a child and believed it very innocently. I now come to it as an adult, and I believe it is a sign given to us already of what has not yet come to all, but what will come to all someday.

THIS IS ALSO A STORY OF THE POWER OF THE WORD TO POINT US TO GOD. When Naaman came out of the Jordan and got back into his convoy, he ordered it to turn back toward Elisha's house. The military convoy roared up before the

house once again. This time Naaman didn't wait for Elisha to come to him. This time Naaman humbly came to Elisha. He was truly a different man. He has learned to trust and obey the Word of God. Even the way the general spoke was different. He used to speak of God distantly as Elisha's god. Now he speaks of God with personal experience, and calls God by his proper name, Yahweh, and declares there is "no God in all the earth except in Israel."

Now, Naaman still has a lot to learn. For one thing, he asks Elisha if he can cart two wagon loads of Israel's soil back home, so that when he is home he can still stand in the dirt of the land of Israel and thus worship the God of Israel. The general doesn't understand yet that Yahweh God is God over Syrian soil as much as God over Israeli territory. And for another thing, Naaman still feels pressure to tip his hat to the Syrian god of Rimmon, especially when his king does.

Elisha doesn't try to straighten Naaman out on these things; he just tells the general to "Go in peace." Naaman's still got a lot to learn about God, but at least he is pointed in the right direction. The power of the word has healed him and pointed him to the One and Only God.

It is that way for everyone who turns to God. New believers have a lot to learn about God. New believers may still have divided loyalties – still worship things that they haven't given up. We would be wise to be like Elisha and accept new believers where they are, give them time to mature, and in the meantime let them "Go in peace." Someone once did that for us when we were new believers. Surely we can pay that favor forward.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT: think of how different this story would be had not that slave girl spoken up! Of all the people in this story, she has the least power. She's just a slave girl in a strange country, but her simple witness sets in motion this whole series of events, until Naaman gets a new body and a new relationship with Almighty God. Because that girl spoke up with childlike faith in the healing power of God, the number one enemy of Israel became Yahweh's number one friend in Syria. Or put it this way: that girl was just a slave to Naaman. And Naaman was just a slave to a dread disease. That girl was one slave telling another slave how to be truly free.

What that means for you and me is this: don't sell your influence short. You have no idea of the power that the Word of God can have through you. If a slave girl can have such an influence on her master, indeed upon a whole country, then surely God can work through you and me to bring salvation to others, even to the last people we might ever imagine responding. Think: who is it in your life who is struggling to be free of some terrible affliction? Whom do you know is heavy laden with a burden they wish were lifted? And what would happen if you simply spoke up and told them where they could find relief?

-- Douglas E. Murray