

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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2 Kings 5:1-14

(Naaman,) though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. (2 Kings 5:1 N.R.S.V.)

General Naaman

My father, for reasons that must have seemed good to him, named me Naaman. In our language it means charming, or pleasant, or loveliness. It might not have been as bad as naming your boy, Sue. But it got me into a lot of fights when I was growing up. I can still hear that school yard taunt, “Here comes his loveliness.”

I grew up fast and I grew up hard. I learned how to fight and how to use my brain to get the best of those bullies. In time, my father purchased a commission for me. And I became an officer in the army of Aram. I proved myself on the battlefield and quickly advanced up the ranks. In time I became the top general in the land.

Some people said that I was just lucky, but luck had very little to do with it. I was simply a better soldier and general than others. I worked hard and I worked smart. I earned my rank and the respect that went with it.

People said that I was cold, merciless, even brutal. But no one called me pleasant or lovely. Not anymore. Most people just called me, Sir or General. And I liked that. I was the second most powerful man in all of the kingdom of Aram. I bowed to the king, but even he treated me with the utmost respect.

Let me stop there and talk a little about my country. The Arameans started out as a loose association of nomadic tribes. In time we became a nation centered around the ancient city of Damascus. That is modern day, Syria to you. We shared some common ancestors with our neighbors to the south, Israel and Judah.

Abraham lived for awhile in Haran, which is in Aramean territory. It is unclear whether Abraham himself was Armenian, but the wife that he got for his son Isaac, a woman named Rebekah, was Aramean. When the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, they were told to make a response before the Lord that included the phrase, “A wandering Aramean was my father . . .” That was likely a reference to Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca.

We may have shared some common ancestors, but Aram did not worship the same God as Israel

and Judah. We were sometimes allies against stronger nations like Assyria, but more often, we were bitter enemies. The Arameans often conducted border raids into Israel. It was on one such raid that I brought back an Israelite girl as a slave. I never bothered to learn her Israelite name. Why should I? She was a mere slave. But my wife took a liking to the girl and so I gave her to my wife as a personal slave. My wife called her, Bright. She was a quick learner and she was also cheerful. Most slaves are sullen and resentful, but not Bright. She accepted her situation and became very loyal to my wife.

So here is the thing. I was a great general. I had position, power, wealth, and the respect of everyone I met. I had it all and still I felt empty. There was something missing in my life. I ignored that feeling and pressed on. I kept busy. Which was not that hard, after all, I had an army to run.

Then one day it happened. I noticed some raised red dots on my right arm. In a few days they started turning white and scaly. I consulted the priests and the doctors. They confirmed my worst fears. I had leprosy. It was the most dreaded disease of our times. There was no known cure. People with leprosy literally rotted away, it was a horrible way to die.

I was one of the most powerful men alive. I had defeated many powerful enemies. Yet, I was powerless against this enemy.

I bought expensive cosmetics to cover my spots. But I knew it was just a matter of time before the truth came out. Then I would be exiled. I would lose everything and be consigned to a slow and terrible death.

Bright overheard me talking with my wife about my leprosy and my fears. Bright never presumed to speak to me. I was too far above her station. But she was fiercely loyal to my wife. Bright mentioned to my wife that there was a prophet in Israel named Elisha. She was sure that he could cure me. He had done many other great and wonderful miracles in the name of his god.

My wife told me about the prophet in Israel. Ordinarily I would have dismissed this as mere superstition. But I was desperate. So I went and told my master the king everything.

The king, Benhadad was very supportive of me. He had heard of the prophet before. After all it was Elisha who had anointed his father as king of Aram. The king could have sent me directly to the prophet, but such things are not done that way. If he had done so, the king of Israel would have claimed that the sovereignty of his nation had been violated. So my master decided that it was best to go about this openly. He sent me off with a letter to king of Israel asking him to cure me. That was all proper. After all if a cure for my leprosy was found in Israel, the king there would be sure to claim credit for it. That is the way it is with kings.

My master sent me off with a proper escort. There were horses, chariots, soldiers, and gold. It was a not so small parade of wealth and power. The king wanted to make it clear that I was an important person to be treated with all due respect.

So traveled and presented myself to the king of Israel. He read my letter and immediately decided that it was some trick meant to embarrass him. It is true that there was a lot of bad blood between our nations. But still the king was being a paranoid jerk. Fortunately, the prophet found out about this and sent a message to the king to send me his way. This, the king was all too happy to do.

So I arrived at the isolated, tumbled down shack that the prophet called home. I arrived in a cloud of dust, a thunder of hoofs, and a clanging of steel armor that was enough to wake the dead. But no one came out to meet me.

So I sent on of my soldiers to knock on the door. Only then did someone come out and it wasn't the prophet. It was a lowly servant. I ask you, was that right? When an important person comes asking for your help, do you send them a text message? No, of course not, you come personally to attend to the matter. Everybody knows this. How would you feel if you went to see the doctor with a serious disease and he didn't even bother to come into the room and just sent a flunky in with a message to take two aspirins?

I hadn't been this insulted since those school yard bullies made fun of my name. And it hadn't ended well for them. This was too much to bear. I was so angry that I couldn't even speak.

The idiotic servant ignored my anger and delivered his message. I was to dip seven times in the Jordan River and then I would be clean and free of leprosy. The unmitigated gall of this upstart prophet! I suppose every patriot thinks his country is superior. But my country and its rivers were superior. The waters of the mighty rivers of Abana and Pharpar were clean, swift, and deep. The Jordan was a tiny, sluggish, muddy creek. The very idea that washing in the Jordan creek would make one clean was ridiculous.

I was disappointed and angry. I had half a notion to have my soldiers burn that prophet's shack to the ground. But mostly I was just tired. I gave the order to turn around and head for home.

Fortunately for me, I had surrounded myself with good men. Many powerful leaders make the mistake of surrounding themselves with "yes" men who never dare to challenge them. I did not make that mistake. So my officers, were not afraid to question my decision. They pointed out that if the prophet had ordered something truly difficult, I would have done it. They pointed out that dipping myself in the Jordan might be unpleasant, but it was not really difficult. Another officer asked me if my pride was more important than being healed. I glared at that one for a bit, but then realized he was right.

So, I did as the prophet asked. I submerged myself in the Jordan seven times. And I was healed! It was not only a physical healing, it was also a spiritual healing. It was a type of baptism, that submerging myself under the water that way. I gave myself over the serving the one true God, and I have never looked back. Not only was my skin healed, but the empty place within me was filled. Thanks be to God!

Here are some lessons I learned that day.

I may have been the second most powerful man in the kingdom. But a mere slave girl in my house knew more than I did.

I may have been the second most powerful man in the kingdom. But I was still mortal and was helpless in the face of disease. I was helpless and totally dependent on God's mercy.

I may have been the second most powerful man in the kingdom. But that didn't give me the right or the ability to tell God how to fix my problem.

I was one of the proudest men to every live, but it was in humbling myself that I found God and salvation.

So here is my challenge for you. Are you letting your pride get in the way of what God wants to do for you and through you?

And here is a second challenge: If God asked you to do something hard, would you not do it? Why then are you not doing the small, relatively easy things that God is asking you to do?

Amen.