

HEALING OUR INNER LEPROSY

(01/28/2024)

Scripture Lesson: 2 Kings 5:1-15

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." . . . 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. (2 Kings 5:10 & 14)

For the next few weeks, probably until the beginning of Lent and maybe even into Lent, I would like us to think about the theme of healing. Healing is a mysterious force at work in the world, in all of life, in our bodies, in our minds, and in our relationships. It was an important part of Jesus' ministry and also his message to us.

Last week, we looked at the healing of King Hezekiah, a healing that was facilitated by Hezekiah's prayer, by his sincere effort to set his house in order. This week, I would like us to explore the biblical account of Naaman's healing as recorded in 2 Kings. We are going to focus on Elisha's healing of Naaman partially because it is an Old Testament account of a healing. Most of us tend to associate miraculous healings only with Jesus. We forget about Elisha's healing of Naaman, and we forget that the apostles performed healings. When we attribute miraculous healings only to Jesus, we may inadvertently limit these healings to the actions of a certain very special person who lived at a specific period in ancient history. This can obscure our awareness of the healing powers that lie within each and every one of us. It can prevent us from realizing how we can experience and transmit the miracle of healing in the present.

The two books of our Bible that we know as 1 Kings and 2 Kings were originally one book, the last book in that section of the Hebrew Bible which is known as the Former Prophets. It is believed that they were written or compiled around 600 BCE, soon after the death of King Josiah of Judah.

At that time there were two kingdoms in what we now know as Palestine: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The city of Jerusalem was located in Judah, which was bordered on the west by the Mediterranean (then called the Great Sea), and on the east by the Dead Sea (then called the Salt Sea). Israel, the northern kingdom, lay along both sides of the Jordan River.

The books of 1 and 2 Kings chronicle the reign of the kings of these two kingdoms in the time of what is called the divided monarchy. The divided monarchy was the time following the brief period when the two kingdoms were united under the three famous kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. During the prophet Elisha's time, Israel, which included Samaria, was at war with Syria, which lies just to the north of Israel.

The scripture lesson is about Naaman, the Syrian commander-in-chief. Remember, Syria is Israel's arch enemy, and Syria is definitely the stronger of the two forces. Despite his spectacular success in the military realm, Naaman is not a happy person. You see, Naaman has somehow contracted leprosy.

A little Israelite maid who has been captured by the Syrians in a raid finds herself in the service of Naaman's wife. The maid tells her mistress about the prophet Elisha, a man of God who has the power to cure Naaman. Naaman's wife tells Naaman what the Israelite maid has said. Naaman immediately goes and tells his lord, the King of Syria, what the Israelite maid told his wife about this Israelite prophet, Elisha. The King of Syria then writes a letter to his counterpart, the King of Israel, telling him that Naaman is already on his way to Israel, and that he expects Naaman to return to Syria cured.

Upon receiving the letter from the King of Syria, the King of Israel tears his clothes in anguish! He realizes he is being expected to do something he does not have the power to do. He also realizes that if he can't pull off this miraculous healing, the King of Syria is apt to become angry and attack Israel. In fact, the Israelite King wonders if he is being set up; he wonders if the King of Syria is demanding the impossible just so he can have an excuse to wage war. The King of Israel says,

Am I God, to kill and make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.

It is interesting that the Israelite maid, who is never mentioned by name, helps her Syrian captors. She has compassion for the commander-in-chief of the Syrian army, and she offers a possible remedy for his leprosy. She also has faith that Elisha can accomplish this healing. I am going to refrain from mentioning, at the end of every paragraph in this sermon, that there is an invaluable lesson here about the conditions that could lead to a restoration of peace between Israel and the Palestinian citizens of Gaza. Hamas cannot eliminate Israel, drive it into the sea, and Israel cannot defeat Hamas militarily—at least not without committing genocide of the Palestinian peoples. War will not bring about the release of the hostages. War is not the answer! Empathy and compassion would work a lot better.

As I said, and I promised, I will not repeat this at the end of every paragraph, every section of the story of Naaman's healing. But I wouldn't mind if you just think it quietly to yourself!

In what we Christians designate as Old Testament times, a period in history that gave rise to what should really be called The Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites believed God was on their side. Yahweh, the Israelites' experience of God, had established his covenant with Abraham and renewed it with Moses. Yahweh was the God of Israel—only the God of Israel. The Israelites divided the world into two groups: the Jews and the Gentiles; the Gentiles were everyone who was not a Jew. Israel was the "good guy," and the enemies of Israel were the "bad guys." This dualistic splitting of the world is unfortunately characteristic of our time as well, and not only in Israel. But I am going to try very hard to refrain from pointing out again and again that the message in the Bible speaks to us and to our time as well, especially the conflict in the Middle East.

This passage we heard this morning, the account of Naaman's healing, contains what we might regard as a New Testament perspective. An Israelite slave, a hostage, has compassion for the enemy of her people; she actually helps her captor. Healing is extended to an enemy. The outlook presented in this passage is compatible with the teaching of Jesus.

The story calls attention to two dimensions of life: the secular and the sacred, the outer and the inner. Naaman has been successful in the outer realm of life, but he has a disease that was regarded in biblical times as a punishment by God. This disease could not be healed by the medical establishment of Naaman's time, nor can it be by ours. Leprosy symbolizes a disease that calls for a different kind of healing. Symbolically speaking, it falls into the category of afflictions that need to be healed by God.

Jehoram, the King of Israel, is perceptive enough to realize the difference between the two realms, the sacred and the secular. Jehoram knows he is the king, not the prophet. He can rule in the secular realm, but he does not have the power to heal. He knows that he is not God, which is an important insight for a president or ruler in our time as well as his. But I am going to refrain from saying more about this. He knows God is the one who kills and who makes alive, that God alone can cure a person of his/her disease.

Unfortunately, and this is not uncharacteristic of many rulers in our time as well as his, Jehoram does not know how to tap into the realm of the sacred. He forgets the way. He forgets about the prophet Elisha, the man of God. He doesn't even think of sending Naaman to Elisha. When Elisha hears of Jehoram's despair he tells him,

Why have you rent your clothes? Let Naaman come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.

Naaman goes to Elisha in quest of healing. Naaman has a picture in his mind of how this healing will take place. He, the great military leader of the Syrians, will arrive at Elisha's palace accompanied by a royal guard. Naaman will call out to Elisha. The prophet will come out of his house, stand before Naaman, wave a magic wand and cure Naaman's leprosy on the spot. I think Naaman has watched too many movies!

In the actual encounter, Naaman pulls up before Elisha's humble cottage in his chariot bearing expensive gifts, psyched for a reenactment of Moses inflicting the plagues on Egypt or causing the Red Sea to part. Perhaps this was how the priests of Rimmon, the god of the Assyrians, operated. Naaman believes in healing, but he has a specific picture in his mind of how this healing will take place.

Contrary to Naaman's expectations, Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him. Elisha sends a messenger to Naaman, telling him to bathe seven times in the river Jordan. That's all. No spectacular scene. Just "wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

Naaman angrily stalks away. This isn't what he expected! He is miffed that Elisha didn't even pay him the honor of meeting him personally. He is upset that his healing is to take place in such a mundane way. He is probably also upset about being told to bathe in the river Jordan.

Naaman does not grasp the deep power of symbols to transport us to the realm of the sacred. He believes that water is water. The rivers flowing through Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, are beautiful rivers! The Jordan is seldom described as a beautiful river.

Naaman also does not understand the symbolic power of water. The water we use in our baptismal service is different from regular water, for this water symbolizes death, rebirth, and cleansing. The Ganges in India is not a beautiful river; in fact, it's filthy! I've been there and I know. Yet it is a spiritually powerful river, and it is deeply meaningful for a Hindu to bathe in it.

The Israelite maid in the beginning of the story puts Naaman on the track of healing. Now Naaman's servants bring him back to it. They remind him that healing can take place in simple ways. Naaman listens to his servants, washes seven times in the Jordan river, and is healed.

How are we like Naaman? Like Naaman, we may be successful in the secular world, yet we may be out of touch with the sacred. Like Naaman, we may live comfortably, yet we may suffer dis-ease. We probably don't have leprosy. Our "leprosy" may be headaches, high blood pressure, heart trouble, or cancer. We may suffer from anxieties or depressions. Those near to us may suffer from our moods. We may be blind to personality defects that are quite apparent to others and that hurt those whom we love.

Notice that Naaman sulks when things don't go his way. How do we respond when life doesn't go the way we plan it, the way we would like it to go? Do we sulk? Do we have a temper tantrum? Do we feel that an injustice has been done to us when life or other people are not the way we want them to be, when other people do not act the way we want them to act?

A Buddhist would say that this response to life is the expression of a delusion, perhaps the greatest of all delusions—the delusion that our little ego is the center of the universe, and everything that happens, everything that people say or do, everything that life brings us, should be judged by its effect on *us*. If it makes *us* happy, it is good. If it doesn't make *us* happy; if it makes us sad or upset, it is bad.

We may have something in common with Naaman. We may also have something in common with Jehoram, the king of Israel. We believe in God, in God's power to heal and make whole, but we forget how to build a relationship with this God. We communicate with people in the outer world, but we forget to pray. Like Jehoram, when we are confronted with a problem that is beyond our power to solve, we become both angry and depressed.

Like Naaman, we need to hear the voice of the little Israelite maid, that still small voice within that reminds us that healing is possible. We need to hear the voice of the servants, that

humble presence that calls us back from the exalted status and the excesses of the outer world to the simple truths of life. We need to stay in touch with the maid and servant within ourselves. C. G. Jung would call this inner voice, this experience of the inner feminine, *anima*. Anima connects us to our soul.

Finally, we need to grasp the power of symbols. Naaman, for all his military prowess and might, for all his success in the outer world, was wrong. Baptismal water is not just water. The River Jordan and the River Ganges are not just rivers. The cross is not just two intersecting sticks of wood. The bread and wine of communion are not just bread and wine if we see them through the eyes of faith. These common elements in the outer world can transport us to the inner realm, the realm of the sacred, and the source of healing for our life.

Like Naaman, we need to become conscious of our dis-ease. There will be times in our life when we are confronted with a problem that we cannot solve. People in our life, perhaps even important people in our life, are not acting the way we would like them to act. During these times, we become painfully aware of our powerlessness, our inability to control the things we would like to control. During these times we realize the emptiness of our successes in the outer, the secular realm. We learn that, just as war is not the answer, control is also not the answer.

We, like Naaman, stand in need of healing--not of outer leprosy, of Hansen's Disease, but of inner leprosy. There are times in our lives when we, like Naaman, need to place our problems and our dis-eases into God's hands. There are times in our lives when we, like Naaman, need to be open to the little ways, the simple ways, the unspectacular ways that God speaks to us, the little ways, the simple ways, the unspectacular ways that God's healing presence and power is brought to bear in our lives.

Perhaps that time is now.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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