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2 Kings 5:1-15b

The Healing of Naaman

How was Naaman healed? He washed seven times in the Jordan River and his skin cleared. That's the short answer to how Naaman was healed—but it's not the whole answer, because it doesn't include all it took to get Naaman to the waters, and all that almost didn't get him there. Nor does it include all that needed healing in Naaman.

Naaman was a great man. This is the first thing today's first reading tells us about Naaman, that he's a commander in the army, a great man; he's respected, feared, he's done well, we'll hear more later about a lot of money he has. Naaman is a great man, according to definitions of greatness of the ancient world: he has wealth, status, access to influence, force—and he's also very ill. Naaman has a terrible disease, a condition in which one's skin becomes covered with painful, open sores, a highly unsightly and highly communicable condition. Perhaps it was leprosy, perhaps another type of ailment. Perhaps this, too, is part of why Naaman was feared. People were afraid of him, and of the illness that he had. Many just kept their distance, did not want to engage with him. They did that in the ancient world.

Except for a little girl who had been taken prisoner on one of those successful war campaigns of the kind that Naaman led. This little girl ended up in Naaman's house, serving his wife. This unnamed girl, identified only as the spoils of war, someone who had been kidnapped from her homeland and forced into servitude, is about the last person you would expect to help Naaman. She might have said, "Let his skin erupt. Let him suffer. Let him be a pariah." She might have said all those things. Instead she said that there was a prophet in her homeland who could help him. We do not know this young girl's name, but we can be sure that Naaman's healing begins with her, with her seeing that he is sick, and having compassion. His healing begins with her knowing healing is available, even to him. His healing begins with her saying something. It's not a big thing; she mentions something to Naaman's wife, but it begins a journey of healing for Naaman, when this servant says that he should go see God's prophet.

But Naaman doesn't do that, not at first. That's not how things work in the world he knows, there are rituals people of the ancient world followed, authorities to be paid their due. Naaman doesn't go to see God's prophet, he goes to see his king, who then sends him to see the king of Israel, the homeland of the little girl. Naaman goes there and takes a lot of money with him. Because that's how things work in the ancient world: you need help, you come with encouragement. This is not encouraging to the king of Israel, for Naaman also has a letter from his king that says, "Heal this man." The king of Israel reads this letter as a threat, "How am I supposed to bring healing?" he cries, and then tears his clothes apart. That's how you signal distress in the ancient world. That might be one way we actually are different, today, we don't tear our clothing when we want to express our discontent. We have twitter. The king tweets, "How am I supposed to bring healing? He's trying to pick a fight with me!" Note the contrast here between Israel's king and the servant girl. Their respective positions of privilege could hardly be more different, yet who shows agency? Who uses what they have, what they know, to do something? Who thinks of someone other than themselves? And who cowers?

Fortunately for Naaman, the prophet known by the servant girl, the prophet Elisha, can hear the sound of clothes being torn from far away. Elisha hears that Naaman is in town and that

the king of Israel is apoplectic and Elisha sends him a message, “Why are you tearing your clothes!” That’s not a very practical way to begin the healing process, after all, unless you are running low on bandages. That is not the case, as Elisha knows. Neither is Elisha concerned about the king’s wardrobe when he asks, “Why are you tearing your clothes?!” Elisha says, “Send him to me, so he may learn there is a prophet in Israel.” There is so much that Elisha says, in that. Elisha is saying, “What kind of authority are you? I will show you authority, and from whence it comes.” Notice, too, that in what he says, Elisha doesn’t even mention Naaman’s illness. Or rather, Elisha doesn’t even mention Naaman’s leprosy. Nevertheless, that Naaman needs to be healed, of what Naaman needs to be healed, is implicit in the prescription that Elisha gives: “Send him to me, so that he may learn there is a prophet in Israel.”

Naaman, at last, goes to see Elisha—and brings an army along with him. That’s what one does in the ancient world: you announce how fearsome you are, even if, and when, you really are in need of healing. Naaman arrives in force, but Elisha the prophet doesn’t even leave his house—not because he’s afraid that Naaman is contagious, but because this, too, is part of the prophetic prescription. This, too, is part of the treatment plan for the commander who traveled with a convoy of money and muscle and expected a reception in keeping with his station and success. Elisha does not go out to see Naaman in person, Elisha merely sends a messenger to tell Naaman that if he wants to be well he should go wash in the Jordan.

Naaman is enraged. Naaman thought for sure, for him, this prophet from a land he conquered would come out and cowtow, would say some special words, wave his arms around and cure his skin condition—because that’s how Naaman is ailing, his illness is all on the surface... Naaman’s healing might have halted right here, but, again, for the words of servants, again unnamed, servants who say something, not a big thing, they point out that it’s not a big thing Naaman’s being asked to do. And wouldn’t he do a big thing, wouldn’t he do something difficult, if he could be healed? So Naaman does what the prophet says. Naaman washes in the waters of the Jordan, waters that centuries later will be a place for baptism, the place where God in the flesh, the Christ, would be baptized. Naaman dips into the waters and his flesh becomes “like the flesh of a young boy,” or as it can also be translated, “like the flesh of a servant.”

How was Naaman healed? There are ways in which it seems unfair that he was, with who he was. Jesus will point this out, too, in the gospels, in reference to this story in particular, the healing of a Naaman, the commander of an enemy army, how he was healed. How well it illustrates how confounding it is, grace. How was Naaman healed? He was healed of his belief that he could engineer his own healing. He was healed of thinking he somewhat deserved it and others should fall into line. He was healed because God has compassion for people who suffer, including people who are full of themselves, including people we might not like, including people who might have done us wrong. Naaman was healed because God is gracious. If our definition of grace doesn’t include that, doesn’t include those people, can it include us?

Some people, we’ll call them God’s servants, know who is included in the grace of God, know for whom it is, which is, everyone, and especially those who are not well. Some people are able to share grace, that which is underserved but of utmost need. Some people are able to share grace, and to share in it, to be part of God’s miraculous process of healing for humanity. Naaman was healed because people said something to him, instead of fearing him, or ostracizing him, or giving in to his worst impulses. Naaman was healed because God’s grace works through people who know what true power is, people who know what true authority is, people who have compassion. Naaman was healed, we can be healed, because the God of Israel is the gracious God of all.