

A Foot in Both Worlds

II Kings 5:1-19

Psalm 30

Galatians 6:(1-6) 7-16

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Today I want to introduce you to an important and influential man, General Naaman. In his day, he was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You would have seen his name in the headlines for the clever tactics he used in winning battles. You would have seen him on the cover of *Time*, surrounded by political bigwigs and in close conversation with his king. You would have heard his name on the lips of everyday people because he had done much to bring security to his country. You would have found his name in bold print, describing the celebrity balls he attended along with Hollywood beauties and Wall Street influencers. You would have seen his multi-million dollar, mansion in *House Beautiful*.

Naaman was it! Naaman was popular! Naaman was the man of the hour! Naaman had it all—intelligence, fame, money, and the ear of the king whom he served. Even without the benefit of Twitter and Facebook, everyone knew and admired, even idolized Naaman. He had won the success game.

But Naaman had a secret. Like the rest of us, there was something he hid from the rest of the world. For some of us it is something we have done or something that someone did to us, a big lie we have told or a great truth we failed to act on, or something about our background or our body that we are ashamed of. General Naaman tried to hide his secret with scarf worn around his neck, a scarf some thought was fashionable, while others thought an affectation. In fact, the scarf covered a spot on his neck.

You see, this great and famous, wealthy and influential, mighty and valorous man was also a leper. He suffered from a skin disease, a chronic, infectious disease marked by sores, scabs and white shining spots on his skin, a disease with no known treatment that was so feared that sufferers were driven from society. If General Naaman's condition were ever discovered, the game would be over—the fame, the influence, the grand parties, the big house, even life with his family.

Now General Naaman worked for the King of Syria and Syria had been at odds with Israel for years. The Syrians and the Israelites didn't just disagree or put tariffs on each other's goods; they fought wars with each other and, in between the wars, carried out incursions and raids. On one of those raids, the Syrians had captured an Israelite girl, who became a servant to Mrs. Naaman. Because she was part of the household, she knew about the horrible disease hidden beneath the scarf. So one evening when she was laying out Mrs. Naaman's gown, she dared to raise the unspeakable with her mistress. "If only the General were to go to the prophet in Samaria, he could cure him of...his problem."

Naaman was desperate for a cure, willing to try most anything, so when his wife told him what the maid had said, he went straightaway to the king, the one man Naaman had trusted with his secret. The king didn't hesitate for a moment, and gave Naaman a letter to take to the king of Israel along with 750 pounds of silver, a ton of gold, a trunkful of Chanel, Prada, Gucci and Ralph Lauren.

So off Naaman went to Israel, in his first class chariot with all the gifts that his king had given him to take to the king of Israel. Naaman, the great success, was worth it.

However, when he arrived at the palace and handed the letter over to the king of Israel, the monarch panicked. A hostile ruler was asking an impossible favor for his favorite general. He had no way of curing this general. The king of Israel made such a fuss about the request that word leaked out of the palace and made its way to the prophet Elisha, who sent a message to his king. "Calm down. Take a deep breath. Send the man to me."

So Naaman packed up the gold and the silver and the fine fashions and headed off to the powerful prophet. When he arrived at the house of the wonderful prophet, he jumped from his chariot, ran to the door and beat on it. But a funny thing happened, the great prophet didn't invite the great general inside; he didn't even come to meet him. He just sent his servant, who told the great general to go take a bath. What nerve! A mere servant telling Naaman to take a bath...and in the muddy little Jordan. In Syria, the Jordan wouldn't even qualify as a river. Naaman was angry, disappointed and felt cheated. Deeply insulted, he was tempted to just go home and forget the whole thing. He was a great man with a big reputation and an adoring public. What would people think? What about his position? What if the word got around that the great war hero had stripped down to his skivvies to dip in the muddy little Jordan? It would be humiliating.

Here was Naaman's choice—

- Death by clinging to an idea of greatness or life by drowning?
- Building a life on the expectations of others or a life grounded in surrender to and trust in God?
- Packing all the goodies he possibly could into his existence or carrying with him nothing but the promise of peace?
- Striving to compete with the wolves of this world or following the Good Shepherd in faithfulness?

And Naaman chose. He unpinned his medals and laid aside his fancy uniform, and, stripped of his pride, he descended into the Jordan seven times. And wonder of all wonders, he saw his wretched, scaly, scabby skin restored like the flesh of a baby.

Now here is where the story of Naaman takes an unexpected turn. When Naaman rose from the Jordan for the seventh time and beheld the miracle of his own clean skin, he realized that this God of Israel was more potent, more generous, more gracious than any god he had known before. So he returned to Elisha, acknowledging the might of the God of Israel. Having been washed, he said, "I believe." But with a caveat. Did you hear it?

“I will worship only this God, every Sabbath, on my knees, with all my heart, except...except when I have to be at work, except when I’m on a campaign, except when I have to join my boss, the king, in worshipping his god. Will the God of Israel forgive me?”

Now here is where your story and my story and Naaman’s story all come together. We too have been washed, cleansed in the waters of baptism, freed from the burden of sin, relieved from having to earn God’s favor, healed of the anxiety of not having enough, not having done enough, not measuring up, not being positioned well enough for the rat race, freed of the ravaging notion of self-sufficiency. When we were raised up from the waters of the font, we were like newborns, no matter our age. We were born new, with the dark stains of our crazy, demanding world washed away. Like Naaman, we want to worship this gracious, generous, health-giving God with all our hearts.

But Naaman was a clear-headed man; he knew that the world would force itself into his good intents. He knew there would be times he would bend his knees to other less worthy gods, times when he would collude with the system even though he knew the system was unable to give him that new baby fresh start. Naaman was a realist; he knew what life was like, so he asked for forgiveness in advance.

We, too, are realistic people. We come, week by week, to this holy place, to acknowledge and worship the gracious and mighty God who has washed us and given us new life. We come in wonder and awe and thanksgiving to humble ourselves before the cross, the place where God’s love for us was demonstrated. We come with our dirty little secrets, hoping and praying that God, who washed us in a ridiculous little handful of baptismal water, will wash us again with forgiveness. We come starving for something more than all our efforts can produce, to find God, who satisfies us with a bit of bread and sip of juice. We come to say, “I believe,” and “Praise.” We come to hear again the promise of peace in our lives.

So here is the amazing twist in Naaman’s story. Elisha doesn’t come back with a harsh reprimand. He doesn’t fiercely tell Naaman, “If you are going to worship the God of Israel, worship only the God of Israel. You can’t have it both ways.” That is what we might expect. But, no. Elisha simply says, “Go in peace.” No recrimination, no rebuke because Elisha is God’s man and he knows that Naaman’s healing like all of God’s abundance, is free. The healing was a gift without strings. With a foot in both worlds, Naaman will praise God and he will also worship a lesser god. But Elisha trusts that God’s work is just beginning in this born-again man. Elisha knows that the peace of God is powerful and will continue to fill Naaman and draw him into more full-hearted worship. Elisha knows that God’s grace has entered Naaman’s life and it will never be the same again. Elisha knows that God’s love will defeat not only Naaman’s leprosy, but every other secret impurity that stalks us.

But we also know that, come tomorrow, our baby-fresh lives will once again be covered over by the earned medals and fancy uniforms we wear in the world. We know

that there will be days when we will kneel to other gods who will disappoint us. So we also come to say, “I’m sorry.” “Help me.” “Walk with me.” “Help me to trust in you.”

Hear then what God says to us who are trying to make it in a world of anxiety, greed, self-sufficiency, and despair. “Remember you are mine and I love you.” “Come to my table; there is plenty for all.” “Whoever would lose their life for my sake will find it.” “Come to me and find rest.” “I will provide.” “My yoke is light and my burden is easy.” And this, “Go in peace.”