

“Simple things in a quiet way. . .”

2 Kings 5:1-14

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Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

I am a Hebrew servant girl. I was stolen from my home in Israel. I now live in Aram in the home of General Naaman. They do not call me by name, only "Girl!", "You, come here, get this, fetch that!" But I cannot complain too much. I am treated pretty well, all things considered. I am not beaten, I am allowed to sleep and to eat and some time to myself. Sometimes I am allowed to speak. Sometimes I am even listened to.

My master suffers a terrible skin disease. None of the many doctors who have come here can help him. He is in pain and it is ugly. I do not fear for myself because it cannot be passed from him to another, but I feel sorry for him.

I told his wife of the miracles our Hebrew prophet had done---many spectacular things! He multiplied bread. He cleansed water. He made an oil jar to continuously refill itself. He even brought a boy back from death to life! I know General Naaman is not a Hebrew, but I believe the Hebrew man of God could heal the General, if only he would ask. . .

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I am Naaman. I am a very important person. I hate to boast, but I am considered the right hand man of the King of Aram, King Ben Hadad himself. It is because of my military brilliance and my courage that Aram recaptured its lands from Israel, and my king is forever in my debt. The king has rewarded me lavishly. There is nothing I or my family will ever want. We live in grand style, with more servants than I can possibly count. And yet even all my wealth and power has not saved from the agony of this aggravating, unsightly skin disease. I am at my wits' end. I would do anything to be healed! Anything! There is no one in all of Syria who can cure me.

Last night my wife whispered to me the words of her servant girl, suggesting I go to Samaria to see a prophet there. I nearly laughed out loud! The impudence of it! A slave girl's advice! But this morning those words haunt me. I am so desperate I think I might try it.

Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

I am Jehoram, the King of Israel. It has been a time of great shame for me. I cannot stand tall; my kingdom has become so weakened. I know that I am laughed at; I am respected by no one. Is this some kind of cruel joke? This General Naaman, what is he doing, leaving a virtual fortune at my feet? 340 kilos of gold and 90 kilos of silver. Woe is me! Am I to be exiled? Executed? What is going on? Woe is me!

When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

I am just a messenger. I do not write these messages! I cannot control what the great prophet says. I know it doesn't make much sense, but I didn't come up with this one! I am not responsible. Only a messenger. . .

But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

I am Naaman! !! Next to Ben Hadad, I am the most important man in all of Syria! What kind of a prophet is this? He won't even show his face! He won't even give me the courtesy of opening his door! Who does he think he's dealing with? Some backwoods rube? I've had it with this backward country, its

impotent king, its ridiculous prophet!

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We servants crouched in fear, once again seeing our master's wrath. He will never be himself again, so long as he is covered in sores that cannot be healed. It is almost impossible to serve such a man. What do we have to lose?

Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

And so it was, that an unnamed slave girl, an unnamed messenger, and a group of unnamed servants opened the way for God to heal the rich and powerful General Naaman, not in the way he sought, nor in the way he expected, but in the quiet, unassuming, small way of the Lord.

This is a story of obedience, and a lesson in humility. To heal Naaman, God required a simple act of obedience, an act of humility. To wash in the muddy Jordan, that puny excuse for a river, when the best medical minds of the Near East had failed? Ludicrous! Too simple!

Though we are far removed in both time and space from that land of prophetic healing, monarchs and conquests, slave girls and servants, Naaman's story is, in the miracle of God's Living Word, our story. Like Naaman, we want the big miracles. We want the quick fix, the instant gratification, and if we happen to be wealthy enough, we are often presumptuous enough to think money can buy anything and everything we need. Like Naaman, we are so busy waiting for the big Word from God, we miss the ordinary, simple, small words.

Like Naaman, we stand in the way of our own healing so much of the time.

We are pretty good about the big things: "thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery" (well, according to statistics we're actually not very good with that one, either), but we think the small things don't really matter. We obey the big rules, expecting miracles of healing and change. All the while we fail to see the miracle of change that happens in the day-to-day, simple things, the small obediences. We fail to recognize that it is here where we are confronted with who we really are, and who we are becoming.

It was C. S. Lewis who once said something like, "All our lives, all our

decisions, all our thoughts are in each and every day pointing us either to becoming a heavenly creature or a hellish creature.” It is the small things we do every day that add up one way or the other.

Most of the time, it is through small obediences that God changes us. Much of the time, it is through quiet, unassuming day-to-day things we are transformed, and yes, even healed.

Every one of us at some time has found ourselves aggravated by something we could not shake off: jealousy, resentment, greed, pettiness, revenge, regret. There is not a one of us who does not struggle at times with temptations that itch away at us: slander, sloth, lying, cheating.

We would be wise to learn from Naaman, whose story is, after all, our story.

In my study this week I ran across an essay by Mary Luti, a freelance writer and former associate dean of Andover Newton Theological School. I can think of no better way to put it, and so I share her words with you today:

“We know Naaman. We know all the irritating and endearing, weak and tenacious behaviors in this story. . . big ideas, bad tempers, smelling a rat, taking offense, throwing tantrums, pleading and cajoling, seeing reason, changing your mind, eating crow. We’ve all asked for brazen blessings on unavoidable compromises. So to watch God leave Naaman alone while never leaving his side is a huge relief. It is also a strong antidote to perfectionism, a reproach to a thousand daily judgmental impulses, a cause of gratitude and praise.”

“God outwaits us while in weakness (and, I would add, simplicity and obedience) healing begins. . . We change and grow, believe and love by grace, the best we can. We [go] to the river, whatever the reason or unreason that moves us; we [wade] right in. Knee-deep in unaccountable love, we meet the One who gives us all our ragged victories and presides over our life.”¹

Knee-deep in the mud and the muck of the river, like Naaman, we meet the One who does simple things, the One who heals, in small and certain ways. . .

¹ *Muddling Through II Kings*, J. Mary Luti, originally published in The Christian Century, September 23-30, 1998, p. 859.