

## Common Healing

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, July 7, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [2 Kings 5:1-14](#) and [Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)

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I'm not sure if we're supposed to be impressed by Naaman's military accomplishments or if we're supposed to pity him because of his "grievous skin disease" (as his condition is rendered in *The Message*). The New Revised Standard Version calls it "leprosy," but that is a catch-all term used for many skin diseases. The scripture is not necessarily implying that Naaman had Hansen's disease.

Cal professor Robert Alter translates the condition as "skin blanch." It makes me think of vitiligo, a condition where skin loses its pigmentation. It could be that this general's problem was that he was too white. There's probably a sermon about racism there. Whatever the condition, it was troublesome – presumably for Naaman, perhaps for his family, and possibly even for his king.

Naaman was a great military leader, but he had his skin problem. The implication is that he did not feel whole (and that maybe people around him didn't see him as completely whole). I imagine him glad to put on his armor – because he was glad to be leading his army, and because it covered up this condition that made him feel broken.

That's what we do with our brokenness. We curate our Facebook wall so everything in our lives seems shiny. We dress ourselves in emotional armor as we go out to face the world. We hide our brokenness and protect our vulnerability. And so, it is never healed.

Apparently Naaman's skin condition was so pronounced his wife's slave knew about it. In some ways, the hero of the story is this enslaved, unnamed, young girl who had been taken captive in one of the raids into Israel led by Naaman. Despite her position, she acts compassionately. This anonymous prisoner of war who has not lost faith speaks up about a prophet in her home country who, she thinks, can cure the skin disease.

In what seems to me to be an act of desperation, Naaman gets permission – and a letter of introduction – from his king and heads off to Israel. When Naaman shows the letter to the king of Israel, the king of Israel totally misreads the situation and assumes the king of Aram is trying to create the pretext for war. Who can possibly cure leprosy? It's the Gulf of Tonkin. It's the bombing of oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.<sup>1</sup>

Luckily, Elisha is keeping tabs on things political and tells his king to send Naaman to him. I love how Nadia Bolz Weber retells the story: "Naaman pulls up to Elisha the Prophet's house in his Bentley, expecting the prophet to come out and do some kind of big, fancy magic show and heal him ... maybe wave his arms over his head, call on the name of the Lord, you know ... something impressive suiting such a 'great man' as Naaman. Instead,

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<sup>1</sup> For information about how the Trump administration is looking for a pretext for war with Iran, I recommend this article: Peter Beinart, "Bolton Keeps Trying to Goad Iran Into War," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/bolton-keeps-trying-goad-iran-war/592108/> (posted 20 June 2019; accessed 6 July 2019).

Elisha sends some raggedy old servant out to tell Naaman exactly how he will be healed: Naaman needs to do nothing more than wash in the Jordan 7 times.

“The Jordan. As though washing in some off-brand river will do anything. Naaman was like, ‘Hmmm ... that doesn’t sound right. [... He hasn’t even looked at these lesions yet.]’ That was not the cure he was hoping for. Until his servant (note that the only reasonable people in this entire story are those without any status whatsoever) ... his servant called him out saying, ‘Hold on. If the Prophet told you to do something difficult wouldn’t you do it? How much more if he only says wash and be clean?’

“Well Naaman follows Elisha’s directions to wash in the Jordan, and is healed of his leprosy. He was physically healed, but I started to wonder this week if perhaps he was healed in another way, too.”<sup>2</sup>

The Jordan isn’t much of a river these days, and Naaman was probably right, that in comparison to the rivers of Damascus, the Jordan wasn’t much of a river back in the day of Elisha. So I don’t know if Naaman had to flail around a bit to get his whole body under the water those seven times. What we do know is that there was a miracle in that water. And I’m not just talking about the leprosy being washed downstream. More importantly, when he stepped up onto the river bank, drenched and dripping, Naaman was no longer a man. “His flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child,” the scripture says. He was a boy again – with all the vulnerability and hope and sense of fairness that children possess.<sup>3</sup>

Bolz Weber wonders, “Maybe his healing was also somehow connected to God disabusing him of his grand ideas. Perhaps he was healed of thinking he knew what would heal him.

“I wonder how often we are attached to an idea of what we think will make everything ok for us. What conditions need to be met in order for us to feel safe, cared for, rested, whole.

“When I make \$10,000 a year more I will be ok

“When I find a partner I will be ok.

“When I lose 20 pounds I will be ok.

“When I get one more graduate degree I will be ok.

“When my parents or my children treat me the way they should I will be ok.

“When everyone in my life acts the way I think they should I will be ok.

“[For] Naaman the Leper, despite his ideas about what he needed or deserved, his healing was somehow connected to just showing up and encountering God, not in the

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<sup>2</sup> Nadia Bolz Weber, “Sermon on Naaman the Leper and How the Common Can Heal Us,” *Sarcastic Lutheran*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2016/07/sermon-on-naaman-the-leper-and-how-the-common-can-heal-us/> (posted 7 July 2016; accessed 1 July 2019). I have done some grammatical editing of the transcript.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Howell, “Weekly Preaching: July 7, 2019,” *Ministry Matters*, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9706/weekly-preaching-july-7-2019> (posted and accessed 3 July 2019).

extraordinary or exceptional, but in the ordinary waters of an off-brand river. He had to let go of what he was waiting for in his life in order to receive what was already there.

“We see a similar struggle in today’s Gospel text when Jesus sends the 70 out on their mission.”<sup>4</sup> 70, incidentally, is just about what our average summer attendance is. Here’s Bolz Weber’s description: “It’s kind of amazing Jesus even got that many people after giving what amounts to the worst recruitment speech in history. Basically, Jesus sells this mission by saying, ‘OK. The first thing you need to know is that we are under staffed. Second, there’s a high wolf danger so watch out for that. Third, you can’t take any money or change of clothes or bag or even sandals. Fourth, stay with whoever will share the peace with you and don’t try and trade up and if there are sick people around take care of them. And fifth, the food might stink but eat it anyway.’

“I imagine that the 70 he appointed – yes, they were appointed ... because, honestly, being a follower of Jesus has always been a lot more like conscription than volunteerism. Well, my guess is that they swallowed hard, and said ‘Ok. We can deal with those working conditions. Now, what’s the mission?’

“And Jesus just looks at them like Jesus does and says, ‘Yeah ... that IS the mission!’

“And they were like, ‘Hmmm, that doesn’t sound right. You should re-check your work assignments Jesus. That was not the work assignment we were hoping for.’ Maybe they already had ideas about what it would look like to be agents in God’s kingdom. Waving their hands about and calling on the Lord. Yet Jesus said all that is needed is to walk the road with one other person, allow yourself to give and receive hospitality, break bread, and bless stuff.

“I understand if they were a little freaked out. I mean ... who am I without my credentials and credit cards? And who wouldn’t want to negotiate for better accommodations? We all want to trade up in some way: get the better apartment, the cooler church [...], the newest iphone, the next level of veganism. But there’s almost a counter-cultural trading down that happens in discipleship. The kin-dom of God comes near in the mundane, in the not-special, in the very much not-cool.[...]

“Christianity is about story and water and bread and wine – things that are offensively common: showing up in life, sharing stories, being the stranger, welcoming the stranger, breaking bread, swimming in rivers.[...]

“We as followers of Christ don’t have some kind of special super power. We are not the spiritually elite. We just have the authority to show up. To show up and proclaim the nearness of God that scatters the darkness. And we can show up for life and for each other and for the world because what we need for healing and sustenance is always the same as the simple, ordinary things right in front of us – that’s just the way God[’s healing] works. Thanks be to God.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bolz Weber, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*