

# “Healing in the River”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – November 6, 2022*

All Saints’ Sunday

Psalm 30

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

2 Kings 5:1-15

This is a story about healing: about how one particular man with a skin condition (which may or may not have been the same as what we call leprosy) through the help of others – named and unnamed – is cured of his disease by dipping in the waters of the Jordan River seven times. He is healed not only on the outside; he also comes to believe that the God of Israel – the God represented by the prophet Naaman, and not the gods of Aram – is Lord alone.

But this is a story about geo-politics as well: about the interactions between nations and the leaders of nations who flex their power in war or the threat of war. By the time of today’s story, Israel had been divided into a southern kingdom, called Judah, and a northern kingdom, which kept the name Israel, but was also called Samaria. Aram was in modern-day Syria, and these neighboring countries of Israel and Aram had been at war. Thus, the encounter between Naaman – commander of Aram’s army – and Elisha – a prophet in Israel – is a confrontation between two men from enemy nations, representatives of the kings of warring countries.<sup>1</sup>

The story begins not with Elisha the prophet, but with Naaman, the commander Aram’s army. He is a mighty warrior, able to use his body to harm others, and yet that body is rebelling against him. He has a great deal of power to influence his own and his nation’s destiny yet had no control over the skin disease afflicting him.

Naaman learns that he might be healed of this condition from an unnamed slave girl who had been captured in a battle with Israel. Where he has power, she has none. However, she has knowledge about something he does not and freely shares it saying, “if only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

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<sup>1</sup> Barb Hedges Gaetti, “Gathering for Healing”

Perhaps to his credit, or maybe out of desperation, Naaman takes her word seriously and goes all the way to the top, requesting to be sent to Israel by the king of Aram. Armed with the king's letter of introduction, Naaman takes along great riches, perhaps as presents, and a military entourage of horses and chariots, perhaps as a threat. The king of Israel suspects that, since he is "not God" and cannot grant Naaman's request for healing, this is all a pretext for more war and so rips his clothes in lament.

Elisha sends a letter to his king, asking Naaman be sent to him, "so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel;" a lesson likely meant for the king to learn as well. Naaman goes, with his entourage and his presents, to Elisha's house, but they do not gain him access to the prophet. Instead, the great commander with his urgent need is met by a servant with a message to go wash in the Jordan River. Naaman is incensed by the messenger and his message; Aram's rivers surely were better, he believed, than this backwater in a country Naaman had already bested in war.

Naaman's ego almost gets in the way of his healing; but it is once again unnamed slaves that offer the voice of reason. They counsel Naaman in ways that combat his power, pride, and position so that he *does* go and washes seven times in the Jordan River. In this seemingly simple ritual, Naaman discovers that he is now healed outside and in; and that now he knows there is only one, true God. Likely feeling vulnerable and foolish in that water, he is stripped of power and presents and left at the mercy of God; a lack of status further solidified by Elisha's refusal of his gifts. Leaving him a great man in debt to an enemy and to that enemy's God, this results in Naaman's vow to serve the Lord of Israel, even asking to take some dirt from Israel home to help him in that worship, and for forgiveness when he accompanies his king to worship other gods.<sup>2</sup>

This strange, ancient story suggests that one reason we gather is in order to find healing; and that, as with the raising of a child, it takes a village to accomplish this healing. From the Israeli slave girl to the wife of Naaman to the king of Aram, himself; from the king of Israel to Elisha to the servants in Naaman's entourage. People of great, or no, status; people considered important and people who tend to be ignored; even people considered enemies; all participate in the healing of Naaman.

Where are you hurting today; in what ways are you in need of healing? From physical pains and illnesses to emotional shocks and disruptions. From losses due

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron Ochart, "Healing"

to COVID to divisive politics to exhaustion from every type of fatigue. From conflicts among family or friends to conversations gone bad or not ever held.

We are each hurting and in need of healing. And so, we gather together, armed with Jesus' letter of introduction to the King of healing, the One with the power and compassion to heal us. We come at the direction of a Galilean carpenter who descended from glory to live among us as servant and washer-of-feet. We come into the presence of God as those who have sometimes been enemies of God, ourselves; participating willingly or unconsciously in that which wounds others and works against love and compassion, mercy and justice.

Despite all of this, or maybe even because of it, we are invited by Jesus to gather at this table of grace. Here, we are asked to remember that – despite all the other things that distract or challenge us – there is only one God. This God is revealed here, in and among this village of faith, speaking to us, supporting us, leading us into healing. Through the bread of life and the cup of salvation, we are nourished and refreshed for the road ahead.

To receive this invitation, God does not require us to first present silver, gold and fine garments. The healing that the Lord provides – outside and in – does not have a price. Naaman initially comes to Elisha's house with these lavish presents, seemingly confident that it would be enough pay for a similarly lavish ritual of healing. So ensconced was Naaman in his own power and wealth that he almost missed the free gifts of healing and renewal being offered to him: by the servant girl willing to speak, by the Elisha pointing him to the river, by the servants in his entourage speaking reason to his bruised ego, and from God at work in the waters of the Jordan.

Thus, when we are asked – as we are in this stewardship season – to give to the church, it is not to be granted what we need, but as an offering of thanksgiving for all that has already been provided by God. Each of us has different ways – and means – of giving; almost every level of wealth, income, and ability to give is represented in this congregation. Nevertheless, we are each integral parts of the village's collective voice: we gather and work together to provide pathways for healing, mercy, justice, and love.<sup>3</sup>

In need of healing as and with and through the community of faith that stretches from unnamed servants through prophets and kings to Godself, the living waters make us citizens not of this or that party or class or country, but of God's

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

kingdom. In need of the bread of life that confounds division, disease, and even death; in need of the cup of salvation that connects us to the giver and re-newer of life, one ancient communion liturgy reads: “O God, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.”<sup>4</sup>

Lord, help us to trust in you as Naaman came to believe he could be healed; help us to speak freely, like the unnamed servant girl, of what we know; and help us, like Elisha, to not be distracted by trappings of worldly wealth or power, but instead to point others – even those who come to us from across wide boundaries – to your healing powers. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Gaetti.