

Proper 9  
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## **Do We Recognize God Working in Our Lives?** *The Rev. Steve Domienik*

I love a good story when the rich and powerful are transformed by the meek and lowly. This is exactly the situation we hear about in our first reading today.

You see, Naaman was a powerful military man, the commander of the entire Syrian army. But even though Naaman was a hero on the battlefield and had a chest full of medals and ribbons, Naaman was not complete. He suffered from a skin disease, a disease that the Bible refers to as leprosy. This was a career ending condition that Naaman desperately wanted to reverse. He had all the wealth and resources at his disposal, but nothing worked.

Then an unlikely figure very different from the mighty warrior enters the scene. She is a slave, carried off in a raid from Israel. Mighty warriors were accustomed to such booty—gold, silver, chariots, horses, and slaves. They could have what they wanted. This particular slave girl had been carried from her home and now served Naaman's wife. She is as small as Naaman is big. The power he has is the power she lacks. Yet, she is not silent. "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria," she told her mistress, "he would cure him of his leprosy."

And so Naaman goes to his boss, the king, and asks for a little furlough time to go down and see what this prophet Elisha might be able to do for him. And right away, the king grants his request.

It's fascinating to see how Naaman came looking for healing in Israel. The text says he brought treasures like silver, gold, and fine clothing. Clearly he was prepared to pay for his healing! He also brought a letter from his boss requesting that the king of Israel do what he can to assist in Naaman's healing. If he couldn't buy it, he could surely influence it politically. And, of course, if all else fails, there is a military solution that he could take what he wanted by force.

Naaman is full of pride—self-reliant, in control, prepared for any eventuality to make things happen his way!" But as usual, God does not typically act in the manner we hope and the same held true for Naaman.

But when Naaman arrives in Israel and shows up at the king's palace, the king goes into a panic when he reads the papers that Naaman hands him. "The king of Syria wants me to heal someone from leprosy?" he says. "Do I look like God? This is impossible! What does he want me to do?"

When Elisha heard Naaman had come seeking God's healing he sent word, "Let him come to me now." Surely this irritated an important man like Naaman. He was used to being waited on, respected. Why, people came to him. He came to no man. Desirous of a healing, however, Naaman swallowed his pride and went to Elisha.

But when the mighty general arrives, Elisha doesn't do what Naaman expected. The military officer expected that Elisha would have him come in and look him over and do something spectacular to heal him. But Elisha doesn't do any of that. In fact, Elisha doesn't even come out to see the army commander. Instead, Elisha sends his assistant outside to where Naaman is waiting, and the assistant tells him to go and take seven baths in the Jordan River, and if he did that, he would be healed.

Now, as you might guess, general Naaman was none too happy with that course of treatment. After all, that would be like us showing up at the doctor's office, complaining of some severe problem, but rather than seeing us the doctor just sends the receptionist out to the waiting room and tells us to go home and take several hot showers and we will be just fine.

I'm sure if that happened to any of us that we would be very angry and most of us would probably leave there in a huff and not do what the receptionist told us to do. And that's exactly how Naaman felt. He was angry. He had traveled all that way to be healed, but all he got was a prescription to take seven baths in a muddy river. He could have stayed home and used the mighty waters of his own country that were much better than this pathetic Jordan river.

How was taking a simple bath in this foreign land going to do anything about his leprosy?

The reality is that sometimes simple is what it takes to heal our problems. But Naaman didn't want simple.

No, he wanted Elisha to come out and do something. He wanted Elisha to dance around and wave his hands and speak some sacred words over him. Naaman wanted something elaborate enough so that he could be sure that God would heal him. After all, Naaman thought himself to be a very important man, so he deserved some grand attention by Elisha and God.

But when Elisha offered nothing like that, Naaman was ready to pack up his stuff and go back home. Fortunately, Naaman's aides were able to convince him to do what Elisha had said. They reasoned that if Elisha had asked him to do something painful and difficult to bring about a cure that Naaman would have done it. Instead, Elisha gave him a simple and easy solution, so what was the problem?

The difficulty is that sometimes we don't want to hear the voice of wisdom - the simple solutions because we believe that the only way God can save us is with lightning bolts and pillars of fire and armies of angels.

Even though he wanted something extra-ordinary, Naaman listened to his servants and did as Elisha instructed.

When Naaman came out of the water that last time, he looked down at his hands and his feet. His flesh was like the flesh of a young boy. But none of the servants said, "I told you so."

There would have been no healing without the servants who turned Naaman's pride around or the slave girl who spoke of God's prophet. The mighty warrior was made whole by the power of God and by the intervention of his servants. It becomes clear that those who witness to the power and faithfulness of God are often those we least expect.

Whose voice do we ignore? Whose voice do we listen to?

This story of Naaman teaches us that all the wealth and power a person might have can't buy what God gives. Naaman goes to Elisha with all sorts of wealth and possessions in order to purchase a miracle. He has a lot of trouble shifting his way of thinking about how a miracle should happen. In fact, the necessary shift in thinking is so profound that he almost misses his chance.

Naaman expects to buy a miracle but, instead, it is a free gift that only requires trust to receive it. The servants are willing to have that kind of trust, but for Naaman this is almost too difficult to believe or receive. He has to give up those things in which he has trusted in order to receive what he most desires.

Remember that it's not the rich and powerful who are favored by God - it is the faithful - those who trust in God. And, it is God who is the central player in this miracle. It is God who heals, and it is God's exclusive sovereignty that is at the heart of the story.

Another important theme in this message has to do with God's radical inclusivity. Naaman was a military leader of a nation often at war with the Israelites. He was a rich and powerful foreigner not one of God's chosen. Naaman was also "unclean" due to his skin disease so he should have been avoided at all costs.

Yet, Naaman receives God's blessing, and, through that experience, he is able to see and witness to God's ultimate and unique power. The message for today's world is that God's kingdom is not an exclusive one. There isn't a separation between God's people and the "God-less ones." God loves each of us just as we are.

Like Naaman, we all have problems that we face in our lives that may keep us apart from God and others. And like Naaman, our pride may sometimes get in the way. We may think that the solutions God offers us are far too simplistic for what ails us. We may want something more spectacular and glorious. But much of the time, the prescription that God hands us is the ordinary: love, forgive, pray, give, have faith. So, don't overlook the ordinary, the simple. Because the solution to our problems may be closer than we realize.

AMEN