

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany (B/RCL)  
February 12, 2006  
2 Kings 5.1-14, Mark 1.40-45  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

During a baptism the pastor prays a prayer of thanksgiving over the water as it is being poured into the font. The prayer highlights times and places in salvation history when the Holy Spirit moves over and through life-giving waters. Part of the prayer is: “Naaman is washed clean of his leprosy, and the Samaritan woman will never be thirsty again.” As I pray that prayer, I’m not so worried that folks won’t know who the Samaritan woman at the well is (the gal with five husbands and one boyfriend), but I’m always ready to bet that the majority of people listening in don’t have a **clue** who Naaman is.

The problem is, he shows up in the Old Testament and his name is **not** Adam, Noah or Moses. Even though we Lutheran Christians believe that the written Word of God, the Bible, is, in Luther’s words, “the cradle that holds Christ,” we’re not as biblically literate as we could or should be. Today, though, we can enlighten ourselves at least a little bit by finding out who this Naaman fellow in the baptismal prayer is! It’s important, because we’re **related**...

For the benefit of the folks doing the bible study on David, Naaman lived about a hundred years **later** than David, in the ninth century B.C. He was a pagan, a Syrian general who had helped to whomp Israel in battle, so he was in the good graces of his boss, the Syrian king. The author of Second Kings says,

Naaman... was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him **the LORD** had given victory to Aram [another name for ancient Syria, present day ]. 2 Kings 5.1

Interesting, isn't it, that **the LORD** gave Naaman success over **the Israelites** on the battlefield? God loves and blesses an "outsider." God smiled on Naaman in war, and yet Naaman had a terrible skin disease, which would have been seen as an affliction sent from on high. That mix of blessing and curse in Naaman's life was a puzzlement....

Naaman's sickness is referred to as "leprosy," which we **think** we know something about, but wait a minute! There weren't as many precise diagnoses back then as there are now, so the term leprosy covered a lot of bases: mildew on the walls (?!), psoriasis, and actual Hansen's Disease, the dreaded incurable condition that can make people's fingers and toes fall off, when left untreated.

Naaman couldn't have had the type of leprosy that resulted in people having to wear bells around their necks to keep everyone else far enough away to avoid catching it.... He hadn't been ostracized from the community, wasn't living in a cave, wasn't dependent on kind strangers to throw crusts of bread in his direction. He was top dog in the army and kept company with the king. We **are** told that he "**suffered**" from his condition, though. He was desperate enough that he traveled a **long** way to find the cure he longed for....

Naaman found out about a possible route to relief by word of mouth. His wife had a little slave girl, captured in a raid on Israel. The child must have had the gift of compassion, because she said to her mistress,

'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' (2 Kings 5.3)

Naaman, who had been **physically** humbled by his disease, was **spiritually** humble (and desperate) enough to take that tidbit of hope offered by a slave to the king, requesting permission to take medical leave. We've heard how Naaman then traveled

with a letter of introduction from his own king to the king of Israel. Kings get their wires crossed, too, and these two are like Abbot and Costello. The one didn't listen closely enough to realize it was a **prophet** of Israel, not the king, who performed healings, and the other jumps to the conclusion that he's being set up to start a war. Nothing that happens in the palace stays secret for long, though, so the prophet Elisha learns about the king's agitation **and** Naaman's need, and suggests Naaman be sent to him.

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's place, he is not humble but anxious, arrogant, and prickly. He becomes highly insulted on two counts. 1) Instead of coming outside **personally**, Elisha sends an **underling**, the equivalent of a buck private to speak with Naaman, the five star general. 2) The prescription for healing seems ridiculous: Naaman is to bob up and down in the Jordan River seven times. He basically says, "For **this** I traveled all this way?? To be insulted by a quack??" He's ready to take his marbles and go home.

Once again, though, the little people in the story save the day. Servants and slaves don't survive without eating a big helping of humble pie every day. They know from humility.... Naaman's servants boldly tell him he should **major** in humility, suck up his pride and do the simple thing asked of him. He listens, follows their cue, obeys the prophet, bathes in the Jordan (times 7), and resurfaces with skin that could have made him the celebrity spokesperson for Oil of Olay.

Back to the prayer of thanksgiving over the baptismal waters: "Naaman is washed clean of his leprosy...." I said it's important to know who he is because he's related to us. He **wouldn't** be a close relative except for the words that come out of his mouth after

he realizes he is healed (the verse that comes right after the last line we heard in the first lesson):

‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except Israel....’  
(2 Kings 5.15)

Like Naaman, we too are in need of healing, though unlike Naaman, our affliction may not be visible for all the world to see. Like him, we at times are desperate for a “cure” of **our** sickness of body, mind or spirit. We also are alternately humble and arrogant in the midst of our suffering. Like him, we come across people who direct us toward healing people and places. We too often doubt that simple obedience can bring about the “cure.”

It is at the font, in the waters of holy baptism, that we are spiritually “cured” of the leprosy of sin, exorcised of the demons that would destroy us, and set on a trajectory of life instead of death. In the cleansing, living waters of baptism we become kin of Naaman and of the leper in today’s Gospel, both of whom were also healed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson