

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.^[a]² Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."⁴ *So Naaman^[a] went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.* ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." ⁷As 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!"

⁸When 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." ⁹So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha 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."

¹¹But 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. ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

¹³Naaman'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!'" ¹⁴So 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.

¹⁵Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant."

John 4:7-16

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A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[a] ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

“Living Waters”

While I didn't see any of these when I was there, I understand that there are large underground cisterns in India called “*stepwells*”. These are wells from which the people retrieve water, but not by pulling up a bucket on a rope, but by walking down stairs, lots and lots and lots of stairs. The Indian stepwells were architectural wonders built between the 11th and 16th centuries to ensure accessibility to water even during the driest seasons. They are used still today, as water remains a very scarce commodity. Stepwells are named appropriately, for steps lead to the wells, but also because slowly walking, carefully down, “stepping well”, is needed for a person to survive the journey and to successfully RETRIEVE the life-giving water, and, of course, to be able to have the strength to later carry it up.¹

I would imagine that before anyone sets off to go down a stepwell, they evaluate how much they really need the water that particular day. A bad attitude would get in the way of stepping well in a stepwell for sure. This is unfortunately what Naaman initially had in the story recorded in 2 Kings ...a prideful, arrogant, bad attitude. Naaman, you see, was an important person, a mighty warrior. He was the commander of the army of Aram, the nation we now call Syria. Naaman was very wealthy and powerful, but had a significant problem. It was one he'd not been able to conquer. He had the dreaded and stigmatizing skin disease, leprosy. No doubt he'd sought every doctor and healing remedy possible. Every treatment course and miracle cure out there, he'd tried. He was at the end of his rope when the slave of his wife, a young girl who had been taken as booty during a raid on Israel, provided advice for his cure. As Rolf Jacobson points out, “*It is an ironic twist, characteristic of the God of the Old and New Testaments, that Naaman's salvation from his affliction came from the very people he oppressed. The vast chasm in social power and standing between Naaman and the girl, is reminiscent of the power gaps between Pharaoh and the Hebrew midwives, between Jacob and Tamar, between Siserah and Jael, and indeed between Pilate and Jesus. It is so typical of the theology of the cross, the Spirit of God stirring among the lowly and bringing salvation from the bottom upward.*”²

¹From Morna Livingston. “Temples for water”. In: “*The Stepwell Solution*” https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/printer_friendly_single_item.asp?item_id=93000019. (accessed 10/10/2019).

² Rolf Jacobson. *Commentary on 2 Kings 5:1-3,7-15c*. <http://222.29orkingpreacher.ofg/preaching/asp?commentary.id=4259> (accessed 10-10-2019).

Yes, the girl, a player in a huge power differential, informed her mistress that the prophet and the God of her homeland could cure Naaman's leprosy. Naaman did not know or worship the Israelite God, but yet, he went to see this prophet, named Elisha. He stopped off however first see the king of Israel with a letter from the king of Aram, bringing a tremendous amount of money and expensive things with him. Of course, he did that. He assumed that his salvation and healing were to be bought. But the king of Israel, feeling the limits of his earthly power, did not know what to do with this bribery, saying, "*Am I God?*" At this point Elisha intervened and asked that Naaman come to him, horses, chariots, arrogance and all. But then Elisha did not even bother to leave his house when Naaman and all his pomp arrived. He simply sent word out for Naaman to "*Go, wash in the Jordan (which was a muddy river) seven times.*" Naaman was livid at the audacious behavior, a seeming snub. "*Didn't this guy know who he was?*" "*We're done here!*" He stormed off in a rage. But Naaman's servants, again, the lowly, calmed him. They counseled their master. "*Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? So why not just do this?*" Again, the point is made that the world may think that these things matter to God—war horses, chariots, generals, kings, letters of influence, wealth, religious ritual, pristine waters---but they do not.³ No, what matters to God is a humble, pure and contrite heart.

The end of the story is that Naaman did indeed get humbled, and he was then able to follow directions. He stepped into the Jordan and went down 7 times. And after he came up the 7th time, he was healed. His skin appeared as smooth as that of a youth. It reminds me of Jesus' teachings, "*except you become as a child, you shall not enter the kingdom of God,*" (Matt 18:3) And Naaman then pledged himself to the worship of Elisha's God. A happy ending.

Naaman's pride nearly got the best of him. In fact, it's been said, that since "*Pride is the enemy of hope*", Naaman's pride nearly blinded him to the hope of a renewed life.⁴ But God gave him the opportunity to listen and humble himself, and through this then to receive that new

³ Rolf Jacobson.

⁴ Rian Adams "*Jump In!*" https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jump-trusting-god-and-overcoming-pride-rian-adams-sermon-on-pride-240871?page=28wc_800 (accessed 10-10-19).

life. There was no other option if he didn't want to just continue on as he was, headed toward death. Neither is there any other option for us, brothers and sisters. Is there? Not really, if we want to live?

So, it is important that we ask ourselves today what is it that nearly gets the best of us, if any? What is it? Is it, as it was for Naaman...pride? Pride is so often that impediment to our listening, accepting and faithfully following God's instructions.⁵ It's been called one of the deadly sins because from it so many others arise...deceit of the heart, hardening of the mind, contention and strife. I have remembered since I first heard the quote from Donald Gray Barnhouse, "*The way to up is down. And the way to down is up.*" He was referring to God's way of bringing down those who exalt themselves with pride, but also to God's exalting those who will humble themselves. C.S. Lewis also makes a great observation. "*as long as you are looking pridefully down, you cannot know God because you cannot see something that is above you.*"⁶ (Pause)

It may be that what is getting the best of us is not pride but instead anger, or fear or maybe what might seem to be the opposite of pride, self-deprecation. In Seminary I learned that the ironic thing is that at the core of all of these sins is the same thing, and that is a focus on self. Yes, a focus on self. It keeps us stuck in the old way of living and makes us unable to freely forgive or to accept forgiveness, to give love or to be loved, to hear or be heard, to see or be seen, to accept the terms of new life that are being offered by Jesus and step down into the healing waters....the wonderful healing, living waters of grace. (pause)

Regardless, the good news is that, whereas in an Indian stepwell, you must walk back up all those stairs carrying a heavy bucket or two of water, a great burden. In our spiritual lives, it is God who does all the heavy lifting. We do the going down, getting humbled. God lifts us up. Remember the woman at Jacob's well, in the Gospel text today? The woman likely had been carrying the weight of multiple broken relationships, but when the conversation with Jesus was

⁵ E Barretto, G Charles, W Reuschling, eds, et al. In: J Green, T Long, L Powery, et al. Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching & Worship *Proper 23 Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World* (Louisville: WJKP; 2019), 377.

⁶ CS Lewis. Quoted in "*The Deadly Sin of Pride*" https://www.montrosepress.com/news/the-deadly-sin-of-pride/article_1589c4ac-4227-11e9-80b0-23ef11363d68.html (accessed 10-12-19).

over, she carried away promise of living water that would heal her heart and quench the deepest thirst of all (John 4:15). What Jesus required of her was simply letting go of the old, her preconceived ideas of worship and embracing the new, a willingness to understand that God was present with her now, forgave her and loved her.⁷

It takes some courage as we let go of what we're holding onto, and to refocus on God and surrender ourselves. But yet, like anything, God is with us giving us the strength to accomplish what we are needing courage to do. It may be that God puts some small voice in our lives or a surprising leader from the seemingly lesser places to direct our way. We need listen to them. Certainly, Naaman found this out as he was guided to first dip his toe into the river, and the children of Israel did as well when they crossed the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land, and Jesus did when he submitted to baptism by John. We do this when we come to the font and another in the presence of the congregation dunks us or sprinkles us or pours water over our heads and, with the sign of the cross on our foreheads, prays the words, *"Holy God, Pour out your Spirit upon us and upon this water, that as we go through it, we may be delivered from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from sin to righteousness."*

Friends, let us today ask the question of ourselves, "What do we let stand in the way of receiving what we need the most?" "What nearly gets the best of us"? Is it Pride? Anger? Fear? Self-deprecation? Some idolatry? Well, whatever it is, let's let it go and pray to God to give us courage to step down, step well down into the living waters of grace, letting Jesus open ourselves up to the new perspective on life, whether it be to forgive or be forgiven, to love or be loved, to see or be seen, to listen or to speak. Whatever the need is, LET us step down, step well down and then let us rest in God's arms and be lifted up...well up.

May the glory be his. Amen and Amen.

⁷Anon. "The Stepwell Solution" https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/printer_friendly_single_item.asp?item_id=93000019. (accessed 10/10/2019).