

SECOND READING: 2 Kings 5:1-15b Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman 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." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. ¹⁵Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

This is the word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

FIRST READING: Psalm 111 ¹Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ²Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. ³Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. ⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. ⁵He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. ⁶He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. ⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. ⁸They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. ⁹He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. ¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever. *This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

“Holes, Humility and Healing”

You know, we all need healing. We all have holes in us...in our bodies, in our spirits, in our hearts...holes which need filling in, mending. Maybe they're from physical or mental disease, or from emotional trauma. Or maybe the holes are from a broken relationship, or a sinful soul. Yes, we all need healing and, as we will learn from our OT story today, we will likely have to make a change to receive healing, make a move from the positions and perspectives of our hearts and minds. We may not want to, for sure, nor might we like the way that our sovereign God chooses to heal, but we will know that it IS only God who heals. It is only God who lifts us up, who lift us well up, well up....a lesson Naaman learned so long ago.¹

Naaman, you see, was an important person, a mighty warrior, living during the 9th c BCE. Because he'd won many battles for Aram, the nation we now know as Syria, he'd been rewarded as the commander of the army and was very wealthy and powerful. He was also very arrogant and prideful. This was one of his big problems. Another was that Naaman had a devastating disease. He suffered from the dreaded and STIGMATIZING skin disease, leprosy. Leprosy marginalized him. It made him an outsider in his own country, and it made him desperate for healing.²

No doubt Naaman had sought every doctor and 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 Bible, 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.”*³

¹ Doug Bratt. “2 Kings 5:1-14-Commentary” <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2016-06-27/2-kings-51-14/>. (accessed 10-7-22).

² Doug Bratt.

³ 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, was as “small as Namaan was big,” and as weak as he was powerful, but yet she was a player here.⁴ She informed her mistress that the prophet and the God of her homeland could cure Naaman’s leprosy. Naaman did not worship the Israelite God, but yet, he went to see this prophet, Elisha. He went first to see the king of Israel with a letter from the king of Aram and a tremendous amount of expensive things. Scholars tell us that Naaman was trying to create a social bond with the Israelite king which would obligate him to give hospitality, and in this case, find a cure for the leprosy.⁵ But the gifts put the Israelite King in a bind. He could not refuse the gift, but he knew he could not cure the leprosy.

Providentially, the prophet, Elisha intervened at this point and asked that Naaman come to him, horses, chariots, arrogance and all. But when he arrived, Elisha did not even leave his house. He simply sent instructions out for Naaman to follow. It seems that Elisha was wanting to show Naaman where his help really came from. “*Go, wash in the Jordan seven times,*” he said. (Note: the Jordan was a small, muddy river, separating the two countries, the conquered from the conquerors, and Naaman was being asked to take off his fancy clothes and enter the river from the conquered side). Naaman was livid at the audacious request and seeming snub. “*Didn’t this guy know who he was? We’re done here!*” He stormed off. But Naaman’s servants, again, the lowly, calmed him. They counseled their master. “*If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? So why not just do this simple thing?*” Again, the point is made that the world may think that these things matter to God—chariots, generals, kings, wealth, religious ritual, pristine waters---but they do not. No, what matters to God is a humble, pure and contrite heart.

The end of the story is that Naaman did follow the directions. He humbled himself and washing in the Jordan 7 times. And after he came up the 7th time, he was healed, his skin as beautifully whole as a young child. And Naaman then pledged himself to worship Elisha’s God. A happy ending.

⁴ Barbara Lundblad. “*What the Mighty Might Learn*”. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200245a/what_the_mighty_might_learn. (accessed 10-7-22).

⁵ Roger Nam. “*Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost “How can we Pray for You?”*” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-3/commentary-on-2-kings-51-3-7-15c-3> (accessed 10-7-2022).

Now, it is important to note that Naaman's pride nearly got the best of him, didn't it? But God gave him the opportunity to listen and humble himself, and through this then to receive new life. There was no other option if he didn't want to just continue on as he was, headed toward death. (*repeat*) Hmmm Neither is there any other option for us, brothers and sisters. Is there? Not really, if we want to live, right? So, today, friends, is it not important that we consider if we are headed toward death, if we are keeping ourselves from God's healing grace? Are we, like Naaman, on the verge of missing out on God's restorative care? And if we are, is it due to pride, to some kind of self-centered justification? Is pride nearly getting the best of us?

Pride can be wrapped in different packages, but it always and simply is an obstruction to our listening, our acceptance and faithfulness in following God's instructions.⁶ And it, pride, hubris, has been called one of the deadly sins because from it, so many other sins arise...deceit of the heart, hardening of the mind, contention with others, anger, and fear. C.S. Lewis famously said, "*as long as you are looking pridefully down, you cannot know God because you cannot see something that is above you.*"⁷ Donald Gray Barnhouse said something similar. He said, "*The way to up is down. And the way to down is up.*"⁸ He was referring to God's way of letting those who exalt themselves with pride be brought down, but also to God's lifting up... well up...those who humble themselves.

Maybe as you hear this today, you are recognizing the brokenness in yourself and you may even recognize that something is getting the best of you. But it may not be "pride", as you think of pride...arrogance, self-centeredness, egotism. In fact, you may consider yourself someone who tends more toward what seems the opposite of pride...self-deprecation. Interestingly, in Seminary, however, I learned that at the core of self-deprecation and the sins resulting from it is... well, the same thing...a focus on self. Yes, a focus on self. And what results from self-deprecation is the same thing too, an obstruction to our listening, our

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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).

⁸<https://books.google.com/books?id=K5emDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT27&lpg=PT27&dq=Donald+Barnhouse,+The+way+up+is+down&source=bl&ots=NLYc4b7QB&sig=...> (accessed 10-7-22).

acceptance and faithfulness in following God's instructions. While wrapped a bit differently, self-deprecation, like pride, keeps us stuck in our 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....in grace. God can do nothing with us when we are too focused on ourselves to listen, when we use our own moral performance, standards, and prerequisites as the basis for our own healing, or when we try to buy, bargain, coerce or EARN God's love.

But, brothers and sisters, the good news is this: Regardless, of how pride is packaged, when we do the work of going down, when we humble ourselves, God lifts us up, well up. God can do everything with us when we cast all our cares upon him and surrender our wills to his. God will heal our brokenness with unconditional grace when we come, as that old hymn "Rock of Ages" says: "*Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling; Naked come to thee for dress, Helpless, look to thee for grace.*"

A number of years ago, a remarkable story was reported in the New York Times of Olympic swimmer Amanda Beard. Having amassed a number of championship medals, she subsequently descended into the darkness of a dissolute and dysfunctional life, immersed in alcohol and drugs and laden with frequent episodes of self-mutilation. Behind a mask of gregariousness and a toothy smile, Amanda hid the pain of her anger, sadness, and self-loathing. When she finally embarked on the road to recovery, she had an epiphany: she did not have to win every race in order to be loved.⁹

You know what? You're right, Amanda. You don't have to win every race...In fact, when it comes to God's love and acceptance you don't have to win anything at all. God's healing will be given you simply if you humble your heart and open yourself to God's embrace. In fact, you and all of us will find joy in experiencing that healing love, however it comes, however long it takes. It will direct our lives. It may come suddenly or very slowly, boldly or very subtly, loudly or very quietly, or it may come even through a small voice in our lives, through a

⁹ Quoted in John Boyle. "*Hokum, Humility, and Healing.*" https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2010/080810_8am.html. (accessed 10-7-22).

surprising leader from a seemingly lesser place. We need just remember to go down, and rest in God's arms and we'll be lifted up...well up...well up. May the glory be his. Amen and Amen.