

## INSIDE OUT

*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. <sup>2</sup>Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. <sup>5</sup>And 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. <sup>6</sup>He 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 leprosy." <sup>7</sup>When 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." <sup>8</sup>But 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." <sup>9</sup> So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup>Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." <sup>11</sup>But 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! <sup>12</sup>Are 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. <sup>13</sup>But 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?'" <sup>14</sup>So 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. <sup>15</sup>Then 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; please accept a present from your servant."*

(II Kings 5:1-15, NRSV)

The story of Naaman, the Syrian general in today's scripture lesson, underscores the old saying, "When you've got your health you've got everything." For despite bearing close ties to the king and boasting a mile long list of military victories, Naaman had leprosy. Because of this, Naaman had nothing in the way of a normal life. Since leprosy was so contagious, he could not have a close relationship with his family or friends. He also lived with the reality of gradually losing parts of his body and eventually dying young. Mighty Naaman and his fierce Syrian army could seemingly defeat any foe that came down the pike, but some foes are too mighty. Despite great power and wealth, Naaman could not defeat this dreaded disease.

Naaman had no medical experts to turn to, no drug trials to participate in, no support group that could offer information and counseling. In fact, Naaman's case seemed hopeless. Who could have dreamed that an apparent nobody

would enter the picture, a nobody who would rescue the most powerful man she knew. The so-called “nobody” was an Israelite servant girl who had been captured in a Syrian raid of her country. We do not even know her name. This unknown girl served Naaman’s wife, and upon hearing the general’s predicament, she offered a solution. It’s a miracle that she would even want to help. How many of us in her shoes, captured by an army and forced to serve in the general’s house, would want to do him any favors. But this Israelite servant held captive in Syria had compassion on her master, and went out of her way to recommend that he pay a visit to the prophet Elisha back in Israel.

Desperate for a cure, Naaman approached his king for advice. Despite the unusual nature of the request, the king wanted nothing more than to see his number one general healed, so he urged Naaman to go to Israel and voluntarily penned a letter to the Israelite king to assure that all went smoothly. Armed with the letter, Naaman prepared for his trip by loading up his chariots and horses with silver and gold. He would pay any price necessary in order to be healed. Upon reaching Israel, Naaman presented his official letter to the Israelite king who thought the whole thing was a trick. After all, no king on earth had command over leprosy and when he could not perform, he felt sure Syria would use this as an excuse to invade.

When I was rereading this story, I couldn’t help but notice that the king of Israel knew less than the servant girl. Spiritual insight and wisdom have nothing to do with noble birth or the finest education. Instead these gifts go to those whose hearts and souls drink deeply from the life-giving streams of God’s Spirit.

Fortunately for the King of Israel and Naaman, Elisha heard about the predicament and sent word that he could help. So the King sent Naaman to Elisha’s house. I can just

picture it now: Naaman and his entourage roll up in chariots outside of Elisha's house expecting a fitting welcome with a primetime miracle shortly to follow. But Elisha had his own way of doing things and didn't roll out the red carpet for the five star general. Instead of seeing him in person, Elisha sent his servant to deliver the prescription. Elisha's servant told Naaman that he would be healed after bathing in the Jordan River seven times. At this point, Naaman blew his top. It was bad enough that Elisha failed to meet him in person, but telling him to bathe in the dirty Jordan River was too much. They had better rivers back in Syria. Naaman stormed away from Elisha's house.

In Naaman's behavior we discover that he suffered from another disease—excessive pride. Pride consumed his soul as leprosy consumed his body. In refusing Naaman the VIP treatment, Elisha sought to heal both diseases starting on the inside with pride. As Naaman angrily pointed his chariot toward Syria, his servants prevailed upon him to heed Elisha's advice. This is the third time servants have given Naaman good advice—first the servant girl, second Elisha's servant, and now his own servants. We too must attune our ears to hearing God's word from unexpected sources. If we have closed minds and hearts we risk missing out on the spiritual growth and wisdom that could come our way.

Many times God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish a crucial task. Do you remember the story a few years back about the two guys who worked in a bait shop and saw a car drive into Long Island Sound during torrential thunderstorms? These quick-thinking young men dove in the water, and rescued a woman and her young baby. We may never be called upon to intervene directly in a similar life and death struggle, but we all know people who wrestle against the powers of death in their own lives. We all know people who despair. We can help carry their load.

We, like the servants in today's story can point them toward spiritual hope and healing.

What load do you bear? What burdens do you carry? What keeps you awake at night or robs you of joy? Too many times, we, like Naaman, expect our problems to be resolved only one way, our way, and miss creative solutions inspired by the Spirit. It's a challenge to overcome our own feelings of self-sufficiency and reach out for help—help which may very well come from surprising sources.

Such was the case with Naaman. He took his servants' advice and bathed seven times in the muddy Jordan. When he came out of the water the first six times nothing had changed. His leprosy was as bad as ever. Who knows what was going on in his mind as he left the waters for the seventh time. I imagine him filled with fear as well as hope. Perhaps he hesitated before coming out that final time, wondering what in the world he would do if this proved unsuccessful. Perhaps he jumped ahead to thoughts of revenge in case that Israelite prophet had made a fool of him. Or maybe he allowed himself to dream of the luxuries of once again being whole: hugging his children and kissing his wife, shaking hands with an old friend or sharing a meal in the king's palace. We don't know what was going on in his mind, but we do know what he did. Summoning his courage, Naaman arose from the water the seventh and final time. And upon doing so, he saw what he had longed to see for so many years: healing, wholeness.

Understandably so, Naaman couldn't get to Elisha's house fast enough to say thank you. This time the prophet saw him in person and the words of gratitude poured from Naaman's mouth. Now he had his health. Now he had everything. Now he was whole inside and out; and he praised God for spiritual and physical healing.

Remembering his treasures, Naaman offered Elisha his silver and gold in gratitude. But Elisha refused the gifts. His goal was not financial gain. Elisha's only motive was to see a fellow human being helped that God might be glorified. Naaman would have paid any price for the gift of new life, but such a gift is priceless. It only comes by grace.

Fully healed, Naaman made one last request of Elisha. He asked if he could load down two mules with dirt from Israel to take back to Syria. This Gentile who had acknowledged the God of Israel wanted a little piece of Israel with him once he reached home. Naaman's motivation reflects the prevailing view of the day that gods ruled over specific geographical areas, mountains or entire countries. Having some soil from Elisha's front yard would assure Naaman that the God of Israel was indeed with him back home in Syria. Since Elisha granted the request, we seem to have a happy ending to the story. But the story doesn't end there.

Greed enters the picture by way of Elisha's servant, Gehazi, who up until that time had faithfully served Elisha. It seems that Gehazi couldn't resist getting his hands on some of Naaman's loot, so he waited for the general to leave town and then ran to catch up. Gehazi lied to Naaman, telling him that two unexpected visitors had arrived in town and that Elisha had sent him to fetch some of the treasure Naaman had so kindly offered. Imagine Gehazi's delight when Naaman not only bought the story, but also gladly gave him twice as much as he had requested. Gehazi then took the money and ran.

After hiding the loot in his house, Gehazi went to see Elisha who asked him where he had been. We don't know whether or not Gehazi even considered coming clean, but we do know his response: "Go anywhere? I didn't go anywhere." But Elisha knew better. Elisha nailed him with

the truth of the hidden treasure and told him that as a consequence, Gehazi and his descendants would bear the curse that Naaman bore, leprosy. Like me, you probably have a problem with this view of God. But that is another sermon for another day. Today's story ends with Gehazi walking out a leper.

What a story of redemption and retribution. A Gentile, a pagan is healed by Israel's God and learns faith in the process. An Israelite dishonors God, and is cursed by Israel's prophet.

What can we learn from today's scripture lesson? Whatever you do, don't lie to a prophet? While I don't believe that God sends down punishment whenever we stray, I do believe that dishonesty and greed bring consequences. But to me, this story is more about what we should do, than what we shouldn't do. Like the seemingly unimportant people in today's story, God calls us to encourage one another to seek God in order that our lives might be made whole. Like the servant girl, God calls us to point one another in the right direction. Like Elisha, God calls us to be agents of change and conduits of grace. And like Naaman, God desires that we open ourselves to new and better ways of living because if we have our spiritual health, we indeed have everything. AMEN.

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## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, your voice has been calling us. We've felt your whisper deep down, stirring our souls. We've been drawn to your presence. Every day you invite us to a deeper way of living, nudge us toward a more meaningful existence, prod us to hope and love and give. Help us know to the depth of our being that you call us to celebrate, revel, rejoice, and wrap our arms around life. Help us find moments of love and grace when we least expect them.

So many people in our world and our community need to feel your love and grace.

And now, O God, hold us close and never let us go. So let it be. AMEN.

Portions of this prayer were adapted from *Seasons of the Spirit: Congregational Life*, October 13, 2002.