

## The Healing of Naaman

**5** 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>[a]</sup> <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>[a]</sup> <sup>4</sup> So Naaman<sup>[a]</sup> 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>[a]</sup> <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?<sup>[a]</sup> 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>[a]</sup> <sup>12</sup> Are not Abana<sup>[a]</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> But he said, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will

accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. <sup>17</sup> Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. <sup>18</sup> But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count." <sup>19</sup> He said to him, "Go in peace."

## Gehazi's Greed

But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, <sup>20</sup> Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, "My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something out of him." <sup>21</sup> So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is everything all right?" <sup>22</sup> He replied, "Yes, but my master has sent me to say, 'Two members of a company of prophets<sup>Ⓜ</sup> have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.'" <sup>23</sup> Naaman said, "Please accept two talents." He urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi.<sup>Ⓜ</sup> <sup>24</sup> When he came to the citadel, he took the bags<sup>Ⓜ</sup> from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.

<sup>25</sup> He went in and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" He answered, "Your servant has not gone anywhere at all." <sup>26</sup> But he said to him, "Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? <sup>27</sup> Therefore the leprosy<sup>Ⓜ</sup> of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever." So he left his presence leprous,<sup>Ⓜ</sup> as white as snow.

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The Cost of Health Care

2 Kings 5 (Naaman)

Kerra Becker English

Let's imagine this story as a play...

**Cast of Characters –**

*Naaman:* Great man of high favor, mighty warrior, commander of the Aramean army has leprosy

*King of Aram:* Powerful, wealthy, victorious King

*Israelite servant:* Belongs to Naaman's wife, was captured in a raid on Israel, willing to make suggestions to her mistress

*Prophet Elisha:* Known for healing, known for his wondrous works, received a "double-portion" of power on Elijah's death (considered a prophet in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)

*King of Israel:* Jehoram (son of Ahab and Jezebel), "not as evil as his father," Not as powerful, thought it was a trick of the King of Aram to send Naaman to his kingdom for healing

*Naaman's servants:* Willing to confront their master's foolishness

*Gehazi:* Servant of Elisha, consumed with greed

## **Power –**

Deal between the kings – send money, get favors

Servants are willing to speak to their mistress/masters in ways that challenge their authority (there's a prophet in Israel that could heal your husband, the prophet told you to do something simple, why does it have to be so hard)

Elisha – has the power to heal, and is known for it even in foreign territories

## **Money –**

The King of Aram prepares Naaman to go with great wealth to pay for his healing.

Elisha refuses the money.

Gehazi tries to scam some of the money back.

Your health is worth “everything,” but under God's prophet, it's free.

## **Healing –**

Who is entitled to be healed? The commander of the army – even though he's the “Other” army? What about the foreign widow and her child healed in the previous chapter of 2 Kings? We know Elisha has the power TO HEAL, but whom he chooses to heal is really where the plot of this story is going. It's in looking at power and money that we see that Elisha is trying to make a point with this particular healing. He chose to heal the enemy who was absolutely their greatest threat, and to do so without accepting anything in return. It is interesting that the lectionary doesn't include the part about Gehazi's greed. Elisha turned against Gehazi with a curse when he realized he had gone to try to cheat payment from Naaman and his entourage.

We can ask questions about entitlement. Who is important enough to merit healing?

We can ask questions about cost. How do we distribute the cost of healing? Medications? Procedures? Experts? Who can afford it, who can't?

But scripture has a different value when it comes to healing – the value of humanity. Scripture teaches us counterculturally by who Elisha chooses to heal, and who Jesus chooses to heal. Scripture makes the assumption that ALL humanity deserves to be fed, and heard, and healed. And it shows up constantly in these stories. Any time you come across a healing story in scripture, it helps to look at who is being healed and why.

Elisha heals widows, children, outsiders, and here, the commander of the enemy army. Strange choices, don't you think?

So in hearing this story/watching this play – what does it mean for us today?

Walter Brueggemann – writes about the Liturgy of Abundance and the Myth of Scarcity (Christian Century, March 1999) Now 20 years old, but his recurring refrain...

The Bible is full of these stories about the abundance of God, especially in creation

*The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity. It tells how well the world is ordered. It keeps saying, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." It declares that God blesses -- that is, endows with vitality -- the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind. And it pictures the creator as saying, "Be fruitful and multiply." [In an orgy of fruitfulness,] everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness*

*that pours from God's creator spirit. And as you know, the creation ends in Sabbath. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, "I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office."*

But the scarcity mindset forces us to make choices as if there weren't enough to go around, that health care cannot possibly be available or affordable for all, so we make adjustments as to who should get what. We imagine that there won't be enough jobs so we close borders. We imagine that there isn't enough food, so we stock our pantries. We imagine that life is expensive, brutish, and short, when we can live in an abundance of love and support for years when we embrace generosity.

*We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity -- a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.*

*The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us at the turn of the millennium. The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be*

*taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things -- nothing can separate us from God.*

Elisha in his healing of Naaman challenged so many worldly ways – even by today’s standard. I encourage you to re-read this story, reflect on the values that Scripture teaches us, and begin to imagine and work toward new ways of being. That’s what leads a congregation to buy out it’s people’s medical debt, or to start a free health or dental clinic, or to stock food to give away no questions asked. It’s all about experiencing generosity we don’t deserve, in a culture that puts monetary value on the things we need to merely survive. We will still be exchanging dollars for food, and a home, and health care – and yet in God’s economy, all of humankind is valuable and deserves life in abundance.