

Caity Stuart, preacher

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5:1-14

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 leprosy." 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.

SERMON: Guest Preacher: Caity Stuart

What a joy and honor it is to be with you here this morning. My name is Caity and I am a student at Yale Divinity School. My particular focus is at the intersection of spirituality and ecology. But before coming to Connecticut, I moved around from Indiana (I'm a Hoosier originally) to Virginia to be a historian for the National Park Service, and then up to New Hampshire and earned a Masters of Science in Environmental Education. So you can imagine my delight when I was invited to join you all today, to return to this region of the country – to get out of the city, really – and also to be at this historic location. I can just imagine my great-grandfather, who is now deceased, who was once a traveling tent evangelist during the Great Depression, just rolling over in his grave right now with delight knowing that I am here today. So thank you for this honor.

Another thing you should know about me is that I am a practicing Episcopalian. And one of the things I like about the Episcopal tradition is that we follow the lectionary for the appointed scriptures each week, because oftentimes they invite us into stories that we may not have otherwise paid attention to.

For example, let's take this week's story in 2 Kings 5:1-14. By show of hands, who had heard this story before this morning? A few of you. Alright, that's better than me! I was not familiar with this story until last week. Now, you're in good hands, I've done a lot of research! What I think is really fun about these types of passages is just getting to reconnect with stories that aren't in our normal lexicon.

Given the last few weeks that we have experienced as a nation, and given the monumental anniversary that is tomorrow (July 4th), why stay with *this* story when *any* story could have been chosen for today? Because I think there is something really important going on in these lines here in 2 Kings.

To begin, this is a story of how God speaks in unexpected ways, through unexpected people, and in unexpected places.

Our story today starts with Na'aman, the commander of the army for the King of Aram. So immediately, we know three things about Na'aman. First, he is well respected by his king. Second, he's respected because Na'aman recently was victorious in battle against Israel. And third, the text says that he has leprosy. The Hebrew for this word actually means skin condition, so he probably didn't have the type of leprosy you and I are familiar with. Nevertheless, he has a serious skin condition. Not fun. So it's this skin condition that sets us up for the following story.

His wife's servant hears about this issue and tells her mistress that she knows of a guy, a prophet, in Samaria, who might be able to help, who could cure him. So here is this recently captured slave girl, a person stolen from her homeland of Israel, who not only remembers this prophet, but offers him up as a suggestion. She speaks up during what is perhaps the most frightening time in her life and offers insight that she thinks could be helpful. This unexpected person shares unexpected news. And they listen.

So Na'aman does what he knows best and takes this new information through his chain of command: he takes it to his king, the king of Aram. Great. Awesome, he says. Go to Israel and I will send you with a letter that explains everything.

So, off Na'aman goes to Israel. But instead of going to the prophet first...he follows the standard rules of engagement and goes...to the king. Now, keep in mind, he and his army just defeated Israel. In fact, his army was responsible for killing the father of this King he is about to see. So imagine the hysteria this King of Israel must be in when Na'aman, this killer, enters his courts...asking to be *healed*. No wonder the king responds by saying "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to *me* to *cure* a man of his leprosy?" The king of Israel is not only furious but he is also still distraught. He rips his clothing, an outward sign of mourning. He is convinced that the King of Aram is setting him up, and the nation of Israel, for yet another battle. Of course this guy makes a scene.

Like with any good dramatic response, word spreads all throughout the nation of the King's reaction and makes its way to the prophet that the servant girl had originally suggested, the prophet Elisha.

So the prophet hears this reaction and sends word to the King: let the commander come to me. So, with this permission, Na'aman is finally on his way to visit this prophet, finally on his way to get healed. But then he encounters another snag. He gets stopped before he can ever meet the prophet Elisha. Elisha sends a messenger out to meet with Na'aman and delivers one simple message: go, wash in the River Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean. Sounds easy, right?!

Na'aman will *not* have it. First, this message was delivered to him by a messenger, *not* the prophet he came to see. Didn't they know who they were working with here? I am Na'aman, the victorious commander of Aram! Second, *you* are asking *me* to do something about this? You're not going to, just, Harry Potter this situation and heal me on the spot?

And third, you want me to...bathe? In the River Jordan? Na'aman wasn't having it. Why not go to the rivers back home in Damascus? Mind you, this isn't just a question about returning home. These rivers are gorgeous. They are pristine. They are beloved. The River Jordan, though? It was gnarly. It was muddy. And what was worse, it was in foreign territory. It was in Israel. You want me to bathe...there? Forget it. He walks away. Not worth it.

But then it's his servants, once again, that stop him and speak some sense to him. "Father," they say. And I love this part: "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'?" Basically, they say get it together, dude. It's super simple! Once again, Na'aman is delivered unexpected information, from unexpected people, to go, this time, to an unexpected place. And once again, to his credit, he listens. He goes to the River Jordan and immerses himself seven times, and the text says that "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean."

If we continue reading beyond into verse 15, we learn that it is from this healing that he now believes in God. Verse 15 says that Na'aman "returned to the man of God" (that is, Elisha, the prophet) "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.'"

Here is a story of someone who thought he had it all. Who was doing all the right things, talking to all the right people, in order to achieve the outcome he was seeking. And yet, his healing didn't come until he listened to the people and the places that he least expected. Sometimes the most profound answers are right in front of us. And might be more simple than we're actually comfortable with.

One of the many things I find interesting about this story is that we're not the only ones to find great wisdom nestled in these lines. In fact, in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus himself references Na'aman. In Luke chapter four, we find Jesus visiting a synagogue in his hometown

of Nazareth. In fact, he's just returned there after being gone for quite some time. When asked if he would perform miracles for the people present, he reminds them of how the prophets Elijah and Elisha aided foreigners, not just the locals. In verse 27, he says "There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Jesus here is reminding his followers that God knows no boundaries, that God's healing power surpasses all barriers we create.

These past few weeks and months, we've experienced the creation of, or, for some, the reminder of, many barriers that are in our lives. Abortion laws strengthened. Environmental regulations weakened. All to the backdrop of an increasing war in Ukraine and a pandemic that won't disappear. We are surrounded by so many barriers. We are a nation, a planet, a people that are thus in need of much healing.

Tomorrow's holiday is typically a celebratory one. As it should be! The cookouts, the fireworks, the yard games, the reunions. How can you not have a good time?! And yet, it is a day that reminds us of our problematic origins. This is not our land. And our laws were not originally written to grant freedom for everyone. Now, I'm not here to ask you to cancel our country or to protest against this holiday. You better believe I'll be watching fireworks somewhere because those things bring me such delight! And, like with any holiday, tomorrow's anniversary invites us to reflect. Who are we? Who are we called to be? What is it...in our earth, in our communities, in ourselves....that is yearning to be healed? That is yearning to find new life? What marginalized human and ecological voices are yearning to share the solutions we so desperately need? What voices are right in front of us that, if only we listened, might bring us the healing we need?

The events of these last few months plus tomorrow's anniversary reminds us that we are also a people with a responsibility. A responsibility to listen, like Na'aman, to the voice of God, a voice that we learned from this story can come from unexpected places, and unexpected people, and in unexpected ways. A voice that, when listened to, can bring us a healing that is so desperately needed.

Who is it that is speaking truth in *your* life that you need to listen to? *Where* is it that you might need to go in order to find the healing you are looking for?

I do not have an answer for you today. In fact, I ask these same questions of myself. These are hard times. And it is precisely in moments like this where God comes in and reminds us that you are not alone. *We* are not alone. Perhaps the healing that you are looking for has been right in front of you all along. And maybe, just maybe, the answer is something you were never expecting.

By the grace of God, may you have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to know that God is with you, now and always. Amen.

Today's Guest Preacher:

Caity Stuart is a third-year MDiv student at Yale Divinity School exploring how environmental theology and religious history can provide a spiritual grounding in this era of climate change.

She began exploring this intersection by working for the National Park Service, earning a Masters of Science in Environmental Education at Antioch University New England, and by working for the award-winning company known as Badger. A believer in the power of story and effective communication, Caity has devoted her life to inspiring non-environmentalists to engage with the climate crisis. When not studying, Caity finds spiritual renewal from hiking, letterpress printing, yoga, and gardening with friends.