

I have reached the stage of life where I am really very comfortable agreeing to disagree about things, but we're not going to disagree on what I'm about to say. This story is just odd. Let's just consider the plot, for starters: a general has leprosy, his maid tells him to go see a prophet, his king gives him a note to the other king to do it. The other king has a fit and the prophet says send him on anyway. The general goes to the prophet, who doesn't even visit with him and sends him to take a bath. He finds this offensive, almost doesn't do it, gets talked into it, gets cured, goes back the prophet, asks for two loads of dirt and waiver of liability, then leaves. It's already odd enough, but then the prophet's assistant gets uppity and chases after him for payment and when he returns, he lies about it, gets busted and gets leprosy himself. That's the basic plotline. That is what we have to work with. I'm not sure we can do much with this. I know the apostle told Timothy that all scripture is useful for edification, but our passage doesn't leave me with much optimism that we are going to leave here today in a timely manner with much resembling understanding. How are we going to see God in this story?

But that's our goal, to see God, and so I'd like us to take a crack at this peculiar tale.

Certainly it is separated from us by somewhere in the order of twenty-five hundred years, on the conservative side. It's a different world in which this story takes place, but it isn't a different God who is invoked in its telling. So we need to wander around in it a bit, consider its characters and how they reflect us, consider their issues and see where we fit into this story. I'd like to think about it a while from three perspectives: Naaman, Gehazi and Elisha.

First, though, a little background is in order. The author of this particular book, or rather these books, 1-2 Kings, has a pretty low view of the activities of the monarchs that ruled ancient Israel and Judah. If these were viewed as royal biographies, they would be decidedly the unauthorized version. Written early in the period of time when the Israelites had been dragged off into slavery after ignominious defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, the books of 1-2 Kings seek to answer this fundamental question: how did we wind up in this mess, and how are we going to get out of it? Because the Israelites identify themselves as God's people, their loss of status can be seen as the loss of God's favor, and as such, it represents a crisis of faith to them, one that must be answered or risk losing their identity as God's people. That's who is reading the story, the captives, wanting to know where they went wrong and when, if ever, God is going to act to fix it. That's who is writing to reassure themselves that the God of the Exodus, the God who led Israel out of slavery once before can be trusted to lead Israel out of slavery yet again. It helps to know for whom the book is written. This is a book written for people who want to know, in the face of cataclysmic events, tragic and terrifying, whether or not God still loves them. This is a book for folks who want to know in the face of what terrifies them, whether or not God still cares. Can you find yourself listening to this story with those ears? If you've ever asked the question, "how did we wind up in this mess," then this book is for you.

Perhaps you can identify with Naaman. Perhaps if there is some part of you that can identify with Naaman, you can hear a word for you in this story. I don't think anybody here has leprosy. I'm fascinated by how Naaman is treated in this story. Now, Naaman is an Aramean. He is not from Israel or Judah. In the vernacular, he ain't from around

here. He is decidedly not “one of us.” This is highlighted by the fact that he’s a commander. If he had been an Israelite or a Judean, he wouldn’t have been both a leper and a commander. Why? Because everybody knows you wouldn’t have entrusted the command of a battalion of troops to a leper. Lepers are unclean. Sure, we understand it as a disease, but that’s not a full understanding of how they would have read it. Lepers aren’t just diseased, they are diseased because they are sinful – they got what they had coming to them. They are diseased because they are not favored by God. If we were in their shoes, we would want our army commanders to be persons clearly favored by God. Lepers are not favored by God or they wouldn’t have leprosy in the first place. In a world where everything is attributed to cause and effect, it’s very simple. The fact that he is both a leper and a commander is a clue that he isn’t from around here.

And Naaman knows he isn’t from around here. He knows it because when he approaches Elisha, he balks at how he is treated. He is the commander. He is not supposed to get messages passed out to him through the door. He is supposed to be deferred to. It reminds me of a story when President Harry Truman went to the Pacific to meet with General Douglas MacArthur. If you remember your history, you know it wasn’t exactly a warm relationship. As the story goes, when president and the general both approached the island by air at the same time, each radioed the other to land. And neither was interested in waiting on the other. Each kept circling the island in their airplane radioing the other to land. They circled until MacArthur’s plane ran out of fuel. Naaman is a commander and he is not supposed to have to wait on an uppity Jewish prophet. So he immediately gets in a snit and decides that the rivers of Aram are perfectly suitable for bathing and he isn’t interested in bathing in the Jordan. But finally his servants

approached him and pointed out the obvious: he could be right, or he could be well. His choice.

Do you ever face that choice: being right or having what you most want? I don't want to treat Naaman as an object lesson in humility, but he could be.

And here's the odd cure: he did what the Lord required and he was restored to health.

Now for the Jews reading this weeping beside the waters of Babylon, this point would not be lost: living within the gracious will of God brings wholeness.

That is the outer edge of how far I am willing to push this text: according to this author, living within the will of God brings wholeness. I can't push it any further because it would be hubris for me to make claims of God's healing that I haven't the faintest ability to see through to delivery. Healing stories scare me this way because I know that we bring a different understanding of healing and disease to bear on these biblical stories than did the ancients. I would love to be able to say that the Bible promises healing to any suffering from diseases. I would love to say to you that the good news of the Gospel is that you, too can go down and bathe in the Chattahoochie seven times and be made well. I can't say that, and that gives all of us who claim to speak on behalf of God pause against making promises that would turn to ash in the mouths of those seeking God's healing.

But that isn't the end of Naaman's story. The story is less about Naaman's healing from leprosy than it is what happens next: Naaman, who ain't from around here, becomes a part of the people of God. He recognizes that he is standing in awe of Yahweh who has made him whole, and he sees no alternative but to cast his lot with this Lord whose will

brings wholeness. So he takes two big loads of dirt and sets out to return to his home country changed by his encounter with the holy one of Israel.

Now the illness in this story is a foil, and that is why I can't press too hard against the faith healing aspect of this story. As a foil, it shows what has changed in the story. If Naaman represents one who has been changed, made whole, by his encounter with the holy, then Gehazi represents the one who has tragically missed the point. Gehazi is the one who ought to know better. He represents the established person of faith who has had all of the advantages of knowledge of God's deeds and still chooses a path that leads away from wholeness. If Naaman represents the one who sees God's activity and gives thanks, then Gehazi is the one who sees God's activities and sees only dollar signs. If Naaman is the follower who says in joyful acclamation, this is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes, then Gehazi is the follower who says, if this is what the Lord is doing, then the church needs to do more for me. No sooner does Elisha in humility refuse Naaman's offer of payment for gifts that weren't Elisha's to accept payment for in the first place than Gehazi goes racing after the mules, lickety-split, ready to cash in on what the Lord has done. And in the eyes of the author, this is akin to the slave who buried his master's talent: he has turned his back on the blessings of the Lord, and wholeness cannot be his... not like this. His mistake: believing that the goodness of God can be bought. And it can't. It's a free gift, God's love and favor, and God is always looking around seeking new ways to share it. If we miss that, we miss the point. We'll never be whole if we are looking for a transaction. It's a gift.

And then there is that third person, Elisha. Elisha is neither the one seeking wholeness, nor the one losing wholeness. He is the prophet who is speaking the Word. He is the one

pointing to God, to Yahweh, to remind the people who have lost their way that God has a way that is different, better, whole. Elisha is the one who has been speaking God's word to power, calling for justice in a land that has forgotten what justice looks like. Elisha is the one reminding us that God's way, God's wholeness, while not for sale, while not ownable, is ultimately what God wants for us all.

Here is the thing, though, about all these characters as rich and exciting and scandalous as they are: they are us. Who are you in this story? Are you seeking wholeness? Do you stand in arrogance refusing to embrace wholeness because it means admitting you are broken? Are you in need of penitence? Have you turned away from wholeness and stand confused, hurting, fearful? Are you standing joyfully whole today? Are you standing in fear of how your new faith will appear to your foreign world? I confess that on my best days, I am all of these. I stand in need of grace with each of you, full of confused, conflicting motives, with deep-seated fears and insecurities under the surface as well as joyful relief mixed in. Nobody is purely Naaman, no one is purely Gehazi, and no one is purely Elisha, probably least of all Elisha himself.

There is one more thing I need to say about this author and his agenda: his is not the only perspective on who God is and how God works in the world. It is a piece of the picture the Bible presents, and the whole picture is greater than we can *ever* comprehend. If this author sought to make sense of what had happened to the people, it is the psalmist who understood that God never leaves us. It was the psalmist who sat sometimes in lament, and sometimes joy, but always in wonder remembering who God is and what God has done. It is the Psalmist who gives us a picture of God that is complementary to the historian: it is the psalmist who reminds us that yes, while living in the will of God leads

to wholeness, it is the very God who calls us to wholeness that will never, ever let us go. While it is the will of God that we should live lives seeking wholeness, it is the will of God also to pursue us wherever we may go, and when we are at our *least* whole, when we descend to the depths of despair and isolation from the God who has loved us, that God goes even there to find us and bring us back. That is the Gospel writ huge: the God who wants to make us whole will never, ever let us go. And this has been going on from eternity to now, with God always looking for willing participants in the grace that makes us whole, all of us. The church is God's modern way of trying to do this.

I've been reading a book of old sermons by Fred Craddock, so if you'll indulge me, I'll share another "Craddock story." It seems that Dr. Craddock was in Los Angeles attending a trade conference, a gathering of luminaries called the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. It's the sort of gathering that seminarians and pastors view with slightly starry eyes as the top of the field. Folks in the field were gathered sharing their work, deep insights into the nature of religion and God and the Bible. He says, "the papers were just extraordinary; minute, of course, but extraordinary; strange and removed, but very, very good. We ran from paper to paper and banquet to banquet and conversation to conversation. In the course of one of those hasty journeys in the large hotel where we were, I encountered a woman, frantic fear and high anxiety on her face. Under her arm she clutched a black zippered Bible and she said, 'are you attending this meeting of Bible teachers?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'Is it open to anybody?' I said, 'well, there are open sessions.' She said, 'well, can I come in?' I said, 'What's your interest?' She said, 'I have wasted my life-I would like to become a Christian.' There wasn't anything on the program for her! I didn't dare send her into

Wittgenstein and all that. What was I going to do with this woman? I steered her off to one side, to a refreshment stand, and for over an hour, we talked. We talked about being a Christian. Before I left, I marked her Bible for her, some places where she could read upon her return home.”¹

Dr. Craddock went on to remark that it wasn’t wrong that the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion hadn’t arranged their programs for her. That wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t what they were there for. But, he cautioned, if no one would have spoken to her, there would have been no reason for the American Academy of Religion, no reason for the Society of Biblical Literature.

And so it is not wrong for us to spend time on a Sunday morning considering that the story of Naaman the Aramean is odd. Nor is it wrong to struggle with actions of Gehazi and the subsequent consequences. It is right to seek to ask deep questions of the Bible that we might find insight into how we lead our lives of faith. It is not wrong at all to ask these questions, so long as at the end of our questioning, we remember that it is a God of grace that invites us to think on these things. And if we haven’t left hearing the Gospel, then we haven’t met our reason for gathering. So once more, I want to proclaim that the Gospel is always Good News, whether encountered in the stories of Jesus or gleaned from the old stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. And the Good News to us today is this: living in God’s will is the path of wholeness, and no matter where we stand on that pathway, God is always seeking us out, always ready to bring the captives home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

¹ Craddock, Fred. Craddock Stories. P81