

THE PROPHET'S PRESCRIPTION

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2 Kings 5:1-14; Galatians 6:1-10

"So [Naaman] 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."

2 Kings 5:14

Well, it's the summer — and as you can see by the empty pews, a lot of our regulars are away on vacation. It's the time of year when folks take to the road, relax, see some sights, learn something new — or, just sit on a beach somewhere.

There are all sorts of reasons for summer travel. Business is probably the biggest (whatever the time of year). The next biggest, I expect, is rest and relaxation — and why not? Summer's the time to do it.

I know of at least one member of this church who's gone overseas this summer to study: she's in Australia, where the seasons are reversed and the academic year is in full swing. Then there are those who travel as volunteers: on a church mission trip, or doing something else worthwhile, to help people in need.

There's another big category of overseas travel, though. It's not one you may think of immediately, but millions go on this type of journey every year. I'm told it's one of the fastest-growing segments in the travel business.

What I'm talking about is medical tourism. Have you heard of it? Medical

tourism is traveling to another country to receive medical treatment.

Here in the U.S.A., we're used to being on the receiving end of medical tourism. Centers of excellence like the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and Memorial Sloan-Kettering in Manhattan are used to welcoming patients from all over the world.

In recent years, though, some Americans have proceeded in the opposite direction. They do it for financial reasons.

For certain routine surgeries, like knee replacements — or certain high-cost procedures like fertility treatments that may not be covered by insurance — you can shave tens of thousands of dollars off the cost by going to Thailand or India or Taiwan. Those countries boast shiny new hospitals that cater almost exclusively to medical tourists. The doctors are skilled: many went to medical school in the U.S. or Europe. Those financial savings — especially for the uninsured, or underinsured — more than pay for the cost of the plane ticket and a couple weeks of R&R at some posh beachfront resort.

Today's lesson from Second Kings is about a medical tourist — though this guy's not hurting for money. His name is Naaman, and he hails from the land of Aram: present-day Syria. Naaman is a general: but not just any general. Among

the Arameans, Naaman is *the* general: the man who's led his nation to victory, time and again.

One of the other nations Naaman has overrun, in his time, is Aram's close neighbor, Israel. Since their defeat, the Israelites have maintained their king and national government, but they've been forced to live in the shadow of the Arameans, rendering tribute payments whenever they demanded them.

Naaman has reached the pinnacle of human achievement. He's rich and famous, and powerful beyond imagining. No one in the land of Aram is more important, with the sole exception of the king — and even the king is well aware he owes it all to Naaman's genius on the battlefield.

So when Naaman comes down with a disfiguring skin disease, the King of Aram pulls out all the stops to make him well. He calls in every respected doctor in the land, but no one can come up with a treatment.

Naaman, the man who "has it all," doesn't *quite* have it all. He may stand in his chariot like a conquering hero, a golden helmet on his head. But that scabrous patch of inflamed skin running down the side of his face, disappearing into the embroidered collar of his robe, tells a different story.

Naaman's about given up on doctors when help arises from an unexpected

quarter. Within the general's household there is a slave girl, an Israelite: personal servant to the general's wife.

We know nothing about her: not her name, nor anything about how she ended up in the general's household. Was she captured in a raid on her village? Did she watch as her father and brothers were killed? Did Naaman himself pick her out from a crowd of captives?

She was probably very young when she was taken. Her memories of her homeland are hazy — if, indeed, there's still a home in Israel for her to go back to. But there is a name she remembers, the name of a powerful prophet with gifts of healing.

Elisha. The name rolls off her tongue like a blessing. *Elisha is the one who can heal your husband,* she says to her mistress, who passes the information on to Naaman.

Naaman goes to the king and applies for leave: which the king of course grants him. He also gives him letters of introduction to the King of Israel: so Naaman's medical tourism trip is now an official diplomatic mission.

When Naaman rolls up outside the palace of Israel's king, he's impossible to miss. There's a huge entourage trailing behind: chariots, horses, soldiers,

servants — not to mention clerks and accountants, to keep track of the six thousand gold shekels he's carrying with him. (No medical insurance for this guy: he's paying cash.)

The King of Israel is not overjoyed to see Naaman. The general's last trip to Israel did not turn out well. And what's this about Naaman being sick, and coming to *him* for healing? This has got to be some kind of dirty trick. The King of Israel cries out in despair, for all his court to hear. He rends his clothing. "Look at me," he says: "I'm a dead man walking."

Not long after, a message arrives. It's from the prophet Elisha, in the back country. "Send the general to me," he says. "I can help him."

So Naaman, at the king's suggestion, turns his mighty retinue of soldiers and servants aound. They head in a new direction: towards the simple, backwoods hut of the prophet.

They never do reach it: because Elisha sends out a messenger to meet them. "Go wash in the Jordan," the messenger repeats, cringing in fear. "Do it seven times. The prophet says this will make you well."

Try to imagine one of those well-heeled medical tourists, a millionaire prince of Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. His private jet has just landed in Rochester,

Minnesota, home of the Mayo Clinic. The jet's still on the runway, when the cell phone of the prince's personal assistant lights up. "It's a text message from your doctor," the man informs him. "He doesn't have time to see you. But he says to take a couple of Tylenols, and fly back home. You'll be just fine."

Imagine the prince's reaction to that news, and you just may have an idea how Naaman responded. He's a mover and shaker. He's not used to being brushed off. One word sums up his reaction: rage.

The prophet's prescription, based on no physical examination, sounds just about as dismissive as "Take a couple Tylenol."

"Take a bath," is what Elisha advises. "Seven of them. In the Jordan." "*The Jordan!*" roars Naaman, astonished at the man's impertinence. "That muddy little creek? We've got far better rivers back home in Aram!"

But then, once again, a servant saves the day. (In this story, it's the servants who are wise: their masters less than brilliant.) Naaman's just in the process of turning his entourage around — possibly to realize the king of Israel's worst nightmare — when a second unnamed servant gives him a piece of unsolicited advice.

"With all due respect, my Lord, what hard could it do to bathe seven times in the Jordan? We have traveled long and hard to get to this land. Shall it all be

for nothing?"

And so, with the utmost reluctance (and feeling like a fool), the mighty general Naaman travels to the bank of the Jordan. There he strips naked — revealing, to all the world, the terrible legacy of his skin disease — and dips himself seven times in that muddy brown river. He emerges, as the scriptures declare, with skin as soft and pure as a baby's.

The prophet's prescription sure sounded like medical quackery: but it works!

Martin Luther once wrote: "It is God's nature to make something out of nothing. That is why God cannot make anything out of [one] who is not yet nothing."

Philips Brooks – renowned nineteenth-century Congregationalist preacher – once said, "The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is."

The smallness of his greatness: the proud and haughty General Naaman has to be brought down a few pegs, before he can partake of the healing God has in store. Read forward a few verses — beyond the ones we read today — and you'll

see how Naaman returns to the home of Elisha a changed man: and not only in his physical being. Somewhere, in and amongst those seven dips in the Jordan, Naaman's spirit has been washed clean as well. As is often the case with survivors of terrible illness, Naaman has had all his priorities lifted up, spilled out, an reassembled in a completely different order.

"Celebrity," writes the novelist John Updike, "is a mask that eats into the face. As soon as one is aware of being 'somebody,' to be watched and listened to with extra interest, input ceases, and the performer goes blind and deaf in his overanimation. One can either see or be seen."¹

From this day forward, Naaman is through with being seen. Instead, for the first time, he has come to *see*. Naaman now realizes life has far more to offer than wealth and power. His illness was a fearsome ordeal, it's true: but he now knows that, if he dies with his heart uncommitted to anything beyond his own comfort, the consequences for his soul will be more fearsome yet.

Naaman promises Elisha that, from this day forward, he will worship the God of Israel. Then he asks Elisha for a surprising souvenir of his visit: two mule-loads of earth from the land of Israel. In a simplistic form of thinking that's just as

¹*Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (New York: Random House, 1989), chapter 6.

concrete as that of a pre-schooler, Naaman imagines he needs some Israelite dirt to stand on, if he's going to sacrifice to the God of Israel. He's going to build there, in the land of Aram, a little outpost of Israel, where the God of Abraham may be adored.

On one level, this story of Naaman, General of Aram, may seem to be a tale about a healing, but it's really much more than that. It's a tale about humility: a vivid parable of how, if you and I are truly to worship God, we must put ourselves aside.

An old fragment of Jewish wisdom has a student asking a rabbi, "Why doesn't anyone see God nowadays?"

The rabbi's answer is simple: "Because people are not willing to look that low."

Or, to put it in Christian terms, our Lord Jesus said: "...unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." [Matthew 18:3-5]

Sister Joan Chittister, writing in the Roman Catholic tradition, has some wonderful, evocative stories to tell. One of them is about a priest who once

traveled to see a renowned spiritual teacher, to spend a time on retreat with him.

“Master,” he said upon arriving, “I come to you seeking enlightenment.”

“Well, then,” the master said, “for the first exercise of your retreat, go into the courtyard, tilt back your head, stretch out your arms and wait until I come for you.”

Just as the priest arranged himself in that uncomfortable position, the rains came. *And it rained.* It rained the rest of the afternoon. Finally, the old master came back. “Well, priest,” he asked, “have you been enlightened today?”

“Are you serious?” the priest asked, in disgust. “I've been standing here with my head up in the rain for an hour. I'm soaking wet. I feel like a fool!”

“Well, priest,” said the master, “for the first day of a retreat that sounds like great enlightenment to me.”²

Naaman, no doubt, felt like a fool: standing naked in the Jordan River, waiting to immerse himself for the seventh and final time. Would that you and I could be so wise!

Around the table of the Lord, if we can somehow manage to get ourselves out of our own way, we just might have a similar experience.

²*Light in the Darkness: New Reflections on the Psalms for Every Day of the Year* (Crossroad, 1998).

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