

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: 2 Kings 5:1-14
Sermon Title: "God, Are You Kidding Me?"

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What is the strangest thing you've ever done? Was it bungee-jumping off a bridge or skydiving from a plane? Was it eating a dried-up bug covered in chocolate like that guy on *Bizarre Foods*? Was it suing New York City for \$900 trillion like a Staten Island woman is doing right now? Was it being covered with bees or having to hold snakes in your hands? There are certain things we did once or twice in our lifetimes. Some of those things we had to do – there was no getting around them.

Naaman is the commander of the army of Syria (Aram). He is the Robert E. Lee of the entire military force, the Norman Schwarzkopf, the George Washington of his time. He is a man of distinction, a man of honor and stature, a man with tons of victories under his belt. However, Naaman has come down with a disease that not only would affect in distinguished military career but also his reputation. He has leprosy. Notice in 2 Kings 5:1 how Naaman is lauded

for his excellence, “but,” it says, “he had leprosy.”¹ That *but* cancels out everything else said before it. Leprosy was and is a bacterial disease that damages skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes. The pictures of people with leprosy are horrifying – I saw the picture of a 24-year-old man on the Internet who looked like he was 70-years-old. Leprosy can be cured today, although it might take from 6 months to a year of the constant intake of medication.² But during Naaman’s time, there was no cure. You get it, you are doomed to die with it. And along the way people will be grossed out by the way you look. They will shun you, because they don’t want to look at you and they *don’t* want to catch what you have. Naaman, the distinguished commander of the Syrian army, will lose his career, his livelihood, his community, his family, everything.

Leprosy was and is disturbing enough to have to deal with, but what Naaman is told to do next is even more disturbing to him. A slave girl to Naaman’s wife tells him that a prophet from Israel can heal him. If he can only get to that prophet *in Israel*, the leprosy will be as good as gone. Naaman is Syrian (Aramean). The slave girl and this prophet she talk of are Israelites. Syria and Israel are terrible enemies. There is no way

¹ KJV, NIV, and NAU say, “...but he was a leper,” or “...but he had leprosy.”

² <http://www.leprosy.org/leprosyfaqs.php>.

Naaman will take himself into enemy territory to have God know what done to him. But it appears that Naaman is desperate to be healed, so the king of Syria makes arrangements for Naaman to have diplomatic immunity to enter Israel and visit this prophet.

After some tense moments, the prophet in Israel called Elisha assures the king of Israel and even Naaman that he can heal. There is a prophet of God in Israel, and by God anything can happen. Naaman makes his way to the front door of Elisha's house, and he meets a servant. He doesn't even meet the prophet yet. The servant of the prophet tells Naaman to go take a dip. Go find the Jordan River and dip yourself in it seven times.³

By this time Naaman is furious, not only because he hasn't met the great prophet he heard about but only met his servant, but also he has to do the third most disturbing thing he could ever imagine. He has to go jump in a river that is dirty and unsanitary in his mind. I have once heard that the Jordan River was not the cleanest body of water around. It was not as bad as a river filled with toxic waste from a power plant upstream, but it still was quite dirty with all its mud and algae and other creepy-crawly things. Think of the pond behind our church surrounded with goose

³ Cf. 2 Kings 5:9-10.

droppings and rotting debris. We probably wouldn't want to jump into that pond back there.

Besides, Naaman doesn't want to jump in the Jordan, because he can think of cleaner, holier rivers and lakes in his homeland of Syria. The Aban'ah and the Phar'par are pristine rivers that flow from the mountains. Think of spring water from pure white snow. Think of clean waters rolling peacefully over rocks and nourishing nature itself. This is where Naaman wants to be. Why can't he jump in one of those rivers seven times and be healed? The prophet of Israel (or the servant) says, "Go jump in our river. Do it, or you will not be healed."

Sometimes God tells us to do things that we don't want to do. Sometimes God tells us things that don't make sense. They don't seem logical – they seem as though they are not going to work. We might think that God is out of his mind for directing our lives down certain paths. And yet, God is speaking. We don't think God is not making sense, but God is speaking. We should trust the One who knows all things.

It was not logical for Naaman to dip himself in the Jordan River. Even if he was still in his homeland of Syria, he might not have wanted to dip himself in any of those rivers to be healed. It was all so strange.

There are countless stories that we might have heard of people who were told to do strange things. In their praying, God revealed something to them that they never expected. They didn't think they should go that direction, but God was leading the way. I might have told my story before (so please excuse me for repeating it), but before coming to this church I had interviewed with two other churches in Spokane, Washington and outside Pittsburgh, PA. In both interviews I made it to the top three pastors who could have served those churches. I was confident that I would become the pastor; I convinced myself that God was leading me in those directions. For the church in Spokane, my sister-in-law, my wife's oldest sister, was on the committee to nominate a pastor. We were all convinced that I was going to get the position. You all know how that turned out for me, both for Spokane and Pittsburgh. I was sure of both positions – God had to be calling me there. Yet God had other plans. God had better plans.

I know of others who have looked for jobs and didn't get what they were sure they would get. The pay was excellent. The insurance plan fit the family budget perfectly. The workload and the employees were exactly what they were looking for. And they didn't get the job. "Why, God? Why not me?" they

pleaded with God. Something better came along. God was directing another direction, a direction less clear and certainly less logical.

We may know stories of people who were called to certain ministries that they thought they would never take responsibility for. A woman who called herself a follower became an Elder of the church. A man who thought music was his only ministry became a teacher of little children. Another man who thought God wouldn't use him for anything became Santa Claus and a mentor to youth. Another woman who didn't have many pennies in her pocket finds that she can help other disadvantaged people receive food. None of those paths seemed logical. They sounded pretty ridiculous. Those people wouldn't have dreamed going down those roads, but God opened those roads to them. God called them to follow. They followed, and they were better off for it.

We may know of people who have prayed for certain things to happen for them. They were earnest in their prayers. They believed God was giving them those specific prayers to pray. They admitted to getting angry with God for not answering those prayers, supposedly. They became frustrated and moody and dejected. They didn't understand what God was doing with them. In the end, those people

didn't get what they expected. They got something else. They got something better.

We all have an idea of how our lives should go. We have them planned out in one way or another, some of us having them planned out to the smallest detail. We give those plans to God, expecting him to take them and make them happen just as we planned. It's like putting a document in a copier and pushing the Start button. The page that comes out should look exactly like the document we put in the feeder. However, God is not a Xerox copying machine. He is the living God, the Author and Finisher of our lives. God will write the pages of our lives as he sees fit. God will finish the book of our lives, as it comes together according to his infinite will.

In her book *Listening Prayer*, Leanne Payne says that as we pray with God, we have to move with God. We cannot be stuck in one place: static, stubborn, immovable. God is not static, stubborn, and immovable. We have to follow God to the places he is taking us. We may offer requests to God. We may offer our plans to God as specifically as we like. But once we pray, we release that prayer to God in faith. It is God's to do with, and we cannot interfere. We are God's people to do with as God pleases, and what God

pleases to do is mold us and shape us for perfection. Think of our plans as clay that is still malleable, in the beginning stages of becoming something. God the Potter takes us in his caring yet powerful hands, and works the clay (the plans and even us) to become something wonderful. “God modifies or changes our picture to be more in line with his will,” Leanne Payne says. “[We] receive additional wisdom from above, and even a word from God. Just as [God] modifies the way we think and feel in line with his will, so [God] corrects and often expands the way our hearts [imagine and think].”⁴

Naaman has no clue what he is getting into. Visit an enemy country, meet a prophet whom he never met before, talk with that prophet’s servant (which breaches all protocol in his mind), and go jump in a river seven times. Do all of these things, and you will be healed of leprosy. Believe it, or not.

The funny thing is: Naaman does all these things. Of course, he grumbles and complains at first, but Naaman does them. He jumps in the slimy, muddy river seven times, each time possibly feeling like an idiot. Thank goodness Facebook and digital cameras didn’t exist then, because Naaman would have had a

⁴ Leanne Payne, *Listening Prayer*, 95.

hard time living them down. In and out of the water he goes, and he soon realizes that the infectious disease has vanished. He is not only healed of a horrible disease, but Naaman also gets his life back. He gets back his career, his reputation, his community, and his family. He is physically *and* spiritually restored.

He goes back to Elisha and proclaims that there is no other god than the Lord God. He addresses himself not as the commander of the great Syrian army but as God's servant. Naaman asks Elisha pardon for his sin, and then Naaman tells Elisha that when his master enters the pagan temple to worship, although Naaman has to go inside as well, he hopes the Lord God will pardon him, his servant, for doing something he doesn't want to do.⁵

God is on the move. God has places to take us. God has more work to do in and through us. When God tells us to do something, as ridiculous as it may appear, do it. Grumble if we must, complain and cry if we must. But do it. We will be surprised to see the path behind us, and joyful to live the excellent places we've come to today.

⁵ Cf. 2 Kings 5:15-19.

