

October 9, 2022

Simple Kindnesses

II Kings 5: 1-11*

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May the God....
Please be seated.
Good Morning!

Three people move him on his way.

Naamen is a man
accustomed to being in charge,
getting his way,
mobilizing armies
and winning wars.
But he's got a problem.
The official line is
it's a rash, a mild form of eczema,
but what
he and he and his wife know
is
it's the first blush of leprosy:
the beginning of the end.

So I imagine
in the midst of one of those
hushed conversations
we have with the ones we love
he tells his wife
how bad it's getting.
Her servant overhears
the intimate murmurings
and the next day says to Naamen's wife,
"If only he could go
and see the prophet in Samaria.
That man would cure your husband."

She passes on the servant's words.
Naamen, more desperate
than we might have imagined,
listens to the girl, acts on her words,
goes to his king

and asks
for a letter of introduction to the prophet.
He leaves for enemy land,
with a letter of intro in hand
and awful lot of cash.

He goes first
to the King of the Israelites
and the king
thinks it is a set up.
The King bemoans to his court,
“This man has shown up
with all his goods and horses and chariots,
looking to be healed.
How in God’s name am I to heal him?
This is a plot,
this is a plan, an early maneuver
of a crafty commander.
He wants to blame me
so later he can attack me. “

Elisha a prophet,
close to the king,
is a Holy man of God, who has
little fear of earthly power.
Elisha is intrigued.
And in some very real way,
moved with compassion
for the enemy General’s condition.

Elisha sends word to the King,
via a servant,
“Send him over my way.
I’ll heal him and teach him about God
all at the same time.”

Naamen arrives at Elisha’s home,
in all his splendor,
horses and chariots
with men in armor
and sun glinting off of their breast plates.
Horse and helmet plumes in the air:
A massive snorting, sweating spectacle unto themselves.

And what does Elisha do?
 Sends a simple message out with a servant
 —go and wash yourself.
 Dip yourself seven times
 in the river Jordan.
 Elisha doesn't even
 come out and look at him.
 Doesn't even
 take a gander at his skin.
 Just sends a servant
 with mundane bathing instructions.
 Rinse and repeat
 in a little river they passed along the way.

Naamen's furious.
 Seriously—that's your answer?
 That's what you want me to do?
 I came all this way—
 for you to send me a memo?
 Essentially their version of a text message--
 To go wash
 in a slow, muddy excuse for a river?
 Well heck—
 don't I have
 bigger, better rivers at home
 I could go wash in?
 I came all this way
 for you to tell me
 to take a sponge bath in the Jordan?

He's furious.
 He stalks off in anger
 and truth be told
 in despair.
 Then just as he's about
 to turn his horses
 and chariots around,
 one of his servants approaches
 and quietly says,
 "Excuse me sir,
 but if the prophet
 had asked you to do
 something grand and glorious,
 something publicly painful---

you might have considered doing that
 —you'd probably have done it—cause you want to get well—right?
 But since *we are here*
 and he's only asked you
 to do something simple—
 why not just do it?
 Give it a try?"

His servant's
 simple observation is enough
 to get Naamen
 down the riverbank.
 He dips and rinses,
 seven times over and over and over
 and lo on the 7th time rising
 it is gone;
 his skin fresh and clear like a child's.
 Naamen is healed—
 in the middle of muddy creek—
 made clean.

Naaman, jumps on his horse
 returns still dripping
 to Elisha's house
 and declares verbally what he
 now knows viscerally,
*"The God of Israel
 is the only God in the whole world."*

What starts out
 as a quest for healing,
 becomes more than that,
 it becomes a journey of faith.
 And it's about the profound importance
 of the small deeds
 in strange places,
 the quiet kindnesses
 of ordinary people
 who nudge Naamen along the way
 in his journey.

Three people
 who move him
 beyond himself:

a young slave girl,
a prophet's messenger,
a warrior's servant.
They each enable him
to not only be healed
but to be blessed.
Three people
who go out of their way
to move him on his way.
Three people who
go out of their way
to care for him.

God is more than happy
to make use of the people
and places we do not expect.

My good friend
and colleague in Chicago
Andrea Mysin,
tells a story
of a horrific car accident
she had just a few weeks before
she moved from Denver
to Chicago to start seminary.

As she describes it,
"she was driving up Broadway,
toward downtown Denver
on a beautiful, sunny, Sunday morning,
headed to church.
As she approached an intersection
she could see the light
was about to turn green,
so she didn't slow down.
However, what she couldn't see
because of a large truck
in the other lane,
was a car
that was about to run
the now red light.

Andrea crossed into the intersection.
In a flash then she saw the car coming
and then it was all slow motion.
She knew she couldn't swerve,
brake or anything.
There just wasn't time.
And then BAM, right into her.
Metal against metal,
tires squealing, air bag deploying.

When her car
finally stopped spinning,
and the airbag deflated,
she fumbled with her seatbelt,
stumbled out,
and managed to get to the curb.

Doubled over, gasping for air,
every inch of her chest and arms
inflamed, bruised, battered.
There on the curb,
she sat, shaking, teeth chattering.
Adrenalin surging.
Feeling lost and confused. Stunned.

Out of nowhere,
a woman approached
an older African American woman.
As Andrea sat on the curb
awash with adrenalin,
tears streaming down her face,
this woman a complete stranger
sat down next to her,
wrapped her arm around her
and held Andrea as she sobbed and sobbed.
Andrea never got her name.
The woman stayed with her,
holding her until the police and ambulances arrived,
until Andrea felt
as if she could stand again.
Andrea said she's never been so grateful
for someone she didn't know.

The woman made it possible

for Andrea to move on.
Such a simple act that—
much like the deeds of the people
in Naaman's life: nudging, supporting,
encouraging him on in his journey.
Here's the thing: The simple things matter.
(Never think otherwise.)

Naamen, would never
have put so much as a big toe,
in the second-rate river Jordan,
save for the people
quietly, steadily
coaxing him
on to wholeness and holiness.

The beauty of this story
is that sometimes
we are the person on the curb,
in need of help,
and other times
we are the ones who choose to pull over
for a moment or two.

**We are called
to both offer those unexpected kindnesses
and to recognize them
as they are happening
when they are offered to us.
God made manifest in our lives,
in the small deeds
of one caring person
given to another—
morning by morning—
day by day—
those quiet kindnesses—
continually reminding us
that sometimes
a dip in the River Jordan
is more than enough.
Amen.**