

God's Unexpected Way of Intervening
2 Kings 5:1-14

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Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 2 Kgs. 5:10

Advent is about waiting for the intervention of God in our lives. One key to watching for the intervention of God in life today is remembering and surrendering to the fact that God works in unexpected ways and does not necessarily follow the plans we devise ahead of time.

My work with you this morning is to illustrate this idea by way of the biblical character known as Naaman, one of the few Old Testament personalities Jesus mentions by name in the New Testament. You can find Naaman's story in 2 Kings 5 on page 332 of the pew Bible. After relating Naaman's story by way of background, I will turn to applying it to matters we experience today.

Naaman's story

Naaman was a prominent and respected member of the military. He was a high-ranking officer. Naaman was not Jewish but from the country of Aram, which earlier had been at war with Israel. The key fact about Naaman is that he was a leper, someone who suffered from the dreaded skin disease that forced people to be quarantined at times, separated from society. You can imagine the difficulties that must have presented to Naaman. How could he lead his army from a distance? How could he enjoy the favor he had with the king? Naaman's leprosy put him at a severe disadvantage and perhaps made him an object of ridicule.

Naaman learns of a way to be healed of his disease. This learning comes in a way beyond imagination, for Naaman learns, not from the privileged, elite, and powerful around him, but from someone quite on the margins of society. He learns of the possibility of healing through the ministrations of a Jewish girl who has been captured in war, seized as property, and made a slave. This powerless girl is able to pass word to the powerful but diseased Naaman that healing can happen through the prophet Elisha.

As soon as Naaman learns healing can be found through this prophet Elisha, he begins to design a series of expectations, all high. We could dwell on any one of them and find sufficient materials for a sermon, but let's just name them in a kind of rapid fire. Naaman imagines that the prophet is best reached by way of the king. He expects that the prophet is best manipulated with the tool of money. He imagines the prophet will recognize his high status and tremendous power and therefore show him great deference. And he imagines the prophet will heal him fantastically, using elaborate ceremony, including, perhaps, dancing, waving his arms, and reciting incantations and such.

In reality, nothing like that happens at all. Nothing like that comes close to happening. The prophet Elisha grants Naaman the requested blessing, but the blessing does not come about in the way Naaman had envisioned. Elisha doesn't come to Naaman with great deference; he sends a messenger instead. Elisha doesn't dance and weave around Naaman in elaborate ceremony. Instead letting Naaman be the happy and passive recipient of a miraculous healing, he assigns Naaman a task to perform, making him an active participant in his healing.

And that last bit is what really annoyed Naaman. Elisha commands this commander to go wash himself in the Jordan River, to drench himself in seven times. That was the last straw for Naaman. He thought the Jordan – that river in Israel – to be far from miraculous. There wasn't anything wonderful about it as far as he could tell. He much preferred his own rivers, the rivers of his homeland, the rivers the rivers of Damascus.

Naaman was ready to turn away and go home. The lauded prophet met none of his expectations and so Naaman concluded he couldn't be the way of healing. Naaman almost missed the blessing because the avenue of blessing did not meet any of his preconceived notions. He came to be persuaded otherwise, however, and God worked in unexpected ways to perform a wonder in Naaman's life.

That is the lesson we draw from Naaman's life. God works in unexpected ways great wonders to perform and we can miss them if we insist upon our preconceived notions of how God should act.

Applications

Well, now, let's apply this lesson from Naaman's life to our own experience today.

And we might as well begin with the most controversial area of them all: these impeachment proceedings our country is going through just now. I fully imagine that everyone has an opinion of what the outcome should be. Those are the rivers of Damascus, as it were, that we want to swim in. But whatever side you are on, this text bids you to consider that God may not be in your set of expectations. Republicans and Democrats each want to bathe in their own rivers and nearly loathe the rivers of the other side. This Old Testament story bids you, whatever side you are on, to consider what God might be wanting to teach you from the opposing side. There might be truth over there that you are unwilling to see.

Or, think about applying the lesson of our text to the prayers many of us have been making. Last Sunday we had the hymn by the Quaker poet Whittier:

Drop your still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of your peace.¹

But what if God is wishing to answer that prayer in ways altogether different from what we imagine. Take from my soul the strain and stress – that is the river of Damascus I want to swim in; but what if God has a different river with better blessing in mind? Phillips Brooks – famed author of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” – is often quoted as teaching his parishioners to never

¹ John Greenleaf Whittier, “Dear God, Embracing Humankind,” *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), #502.

pray for easy lives, to never pray for tasks equal to their powers. Pray instead, he taught them, for powers equal to their tasks.² That's a different river to swim in, and it leads to better blessing than the life simply made easy.

In similar fashion, apply this message of God working in unexpected ways to the changes we are facing. Name just about any area of life that you please, and it is fraught with change. "Why can't things just be the way they were?" a man wondered out loud to me not long ago. There are rivers of Damascus he wants to bathe in – rivers of the old ways, rivers of the old times, the rivers of nostalgia. But our text for today is ready to teach us that we can't rule out the possibility that the changes we face are not erosions brought on by modern times but the very handiwork of God. Change could be the Jordan we are to swim in. Back in days of the prophet Jeremiah – you can find this on page 685 of the pew Bible – when God called young Jeremiah to be a prophet the work God gave Jeremiah to do is described in Jeremiah 1:10. The end result is to build and to plant, but there is prior work Jeremiah is given. He is to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow. So the change that happens around us could be – it isn't necessarily, but it could be – the Jordan God wants us to bathe in for the sake of healing.

It is no Christmas carol. It is no Advent hymn. But it is apropos to our theme this morning. It is #412 in the hymnal. Portions of it sing,

God moves in a mysterious way great wonders to perform;
God plants firm footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.

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Judge not God's way through human sense, but trust unfailing grace:
Behind a frowning providence there shines a smiling face.

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Our unbelief is sure to err and scan God work in vain;
God is God's own interpreter, which truth shall be made plain.³

You may want the rivers of Damascus, but the waters of the Jordan are your lot. And therein is God's unexpected way of intervening in your life, and it shall be full of blessing beyond what you can imagine.

² Alexander V. G. Allen, *Phillips Brooks, 1835-1893: Memories of His Life with Extracts from His Letters and Note-books* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1907), p. 471.

³ William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, #412.