

Thank you so much for supporting my attending the Quadrennial Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. The Quadrennial Assembly is a Disciple's women's conference and one of the best things our denomination does. At the event there were some special highlights that touched me: a) I was blessed to participate in the first Disciple Mission Fund Advocate training; b) I learned a great deal about human trafficking and modern-day slavery; and c) my friend Diane and I did the sign language interpreting for the event and got to see the program participants up close and observe the "behind the scene" working of the production. Therefore I hope that this sermon and others will have a little more depth because of my experiences.

In our scripture we are introduced to a man named Naaman. He was commander of the army of the king Ben-Hadad II of Aram, who ruled from 860-841 B.C. Aram is modern day Syria. Naaman was a successful and courageous warrior, highly regarded because of the victories God had given the Arameans under his leadership and he was very rich. The writer of 2 Kings reminds us that any success in life is a gift from the sovereign God whether you are a servant of God or not. But Naaman had a problem, he had leprosy. Leprosy was a dreaded disease that degenerated its victims and eventually proved fatal. No cure for it was known. In Israel lepers were normally isolated or secluded from non-lepers, but this was not always the custom in other nations including Aram. Naaman was able to carry on his duties as long as the disease permitted him to do so. Leprosy may have been like modern-day cancer or AIDS.

The Kingdom of Aram occasionally battled with Israel, and during one raid Naaman's forces had captured some Israelites whom they made slaves. One of these was a young girl whom Naaman had given to his wife as a servant. You may think such things only happened in ancient times, but each day during the

Quadrennial a sister from a different county shared about the story of human trafficking and slavery in her country. A sister from Ghana told of how the children are sold to be household and industrial workers. A sister from East Timor told of how she had been like this young girl, a captive of war, sold to a family who could not have children. She was raised as a daughter, as she was loved and given a Christian education, but still she had a hole in her heart for her biological family. Did you know there are estimated to be over 400,000 slaves in the United States, today. Many of whom participate in the sex trade or work in sweatshops, or are domestic workers. But, back to our scripture, evidently Naaman and his wife were kind to this girl because she wanted Naaman to be healed. In Israel his leprosy would lead to excommunication from worship with the people. So the fact that his disease was leprosy made it of 'religious' significance. And so it was probably not just because his Israelite maid thought Elisha could do anything, but particularly because of his religious status, that she made her recommendation. She told her mistress, who told her husband, who told his king, that a prophet living in Israel could cure leprosy. Probably the girl had heard of Elisha before she was carried off as a slave. Apparently she assumed he could cleanse leprosy in view of his miraculous power, in spite of the fact that no leper in Israel was healed in Elisha's day. The Aramean king was anxious for his valuable commander to be cleansed, not only because he was a trusted friend but because the dreaded disease would eventually rob the king of his top military commander. Naaman set out to visit King Joram who he assumed would order the prophet to cure him. With him the commander took gifts of 10 talents or about 750 pounds of silver, 600 shekels or about 150 pounds of gold, and 10 sets of clothing, all prized gifts in the Near East. In today's market this is \$205,920 in silver, \$2,906,928 in gold, plus the expensive clothing and accessories. Naaman was willing to give all his wealth to be cured from leprosy and certain death. He also carried a letter from his king to

Joram requesting in matter-of-fact terms that Naaman be cured. The king of Israel read it that he, the king, was to cure Naaman. The king became distressed and asked, “Am I God, to be able to kill and make alive?” In other words, “am I all powerful like God? The King of Aram wants to me to cure a man of leprosy.” But Joram misunderstood. The letter simply meant: have him cured. Ben-Hadad had heard that in Joram’s city was a wonder-working prophet; so he assumed, that like him, Joram could tell his prophets how to use their miraculous powers. So Ben-Hadad was making a sincere request, not trying to pick a fight as Joram assumed.

But, based on his reading, Joram tore his robe, indicating his great anxiety and distress. Israel and Aram had been at peace, but it appeared to Joram that Ben-Hadad was trying to pick a fight as he had done with Joram’s father King Ahab. Joram did not realize that Naaman did not expect *him* to cure the leprosy, but the prophet. But Joram hadn’t even thought of Elisha and had no use for that prophet who constantly opposed him. Although King Joram had no faith in God or in God’s prophet, the slave girl had faith in the Lord and was willing to recommend that faith to others, including her captor.

So when Elisha learned of Joram’s anxiety over the letter he sent the king a message reprimanding him for his unbelief and telling him not to worry. He told Joram to send the man to him for the cure and to “learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” Naaman had traveled over 107 miles, over vast mountains, through valleys, around bodies of water and now he and his whole entourage arrived at Elisha’s door.

Elisha was not at all awed by the great general. In fact Elisha did not even go out to meet him; instead he sent a messenger to give his simple “prescription.” Naaman was told to dip or wash seven times in the Jordan River and he would be free of his disease. The cure lay not in the water of the Jordan but in obedient faith

in God's promise through His prophet. Naaman's flesh had been changed through the leprosy into scabs and ulcers.

Scholars have debated on the reason why Elisha did not go out to Naaman himself. Some say the prophet had a legal prohibition of interaction with lepers. Some think Elisha was afraid he would get leprosy himself. Some believe it was Elisha's wish to prove the miracle in the eyes of Naaman. He was a proud man, like all humans are. He had a great position of authority and every one bowed before him, and served him with reverence. He was powerful and rich, and in his mind he should have been treated with respect. So Naaman had to receive a lesson of humiliation, and at the same time had to learn that he owed his cure not to any magic touch from the prophet, but solely to the power of God working through him.

Naaman turned from Elisha's house angry for two reasons: First, his pride had been offended by Elisha's offhanded treatment of him; he had expected a cleansing ceremony in keeping with his own dignity. Enraged at his treatment, he said to his servant, "I thought, he will come out to me and stand and call upon the name of his God, and move his hand back and forth over the diseased places, and take away the leprosy." Even today people in some cultures think that the touch of a religious person can heal a sore. Second, he resented having been told to wash in a muddy river that he considered inferior to the Abana and Pharpar, rivers in his hometown. The water of the Jordan, he thought, could not possibly do him any good. Naaman wanted to know if he could not have stayed home and bathed in clean Syrian rivers. He was saying "I came all this way and I could have bathed in my own home city. He may have thought he had the key to his healing, just go dip seven times in the river of his choosing. After all, the waters of Damascus are still highly praised by their inhabitants for their purity and coldness."

Deprived of the expected personal reception and appropriate religious ritual, Naaman stalks off. But his staff was more pragmatic. They knew him and apparently cared for him; after all he had inspired loyalty and concern even in a captured Israelite slave girl. They also had more experience than their master of being at the receiving end of official high-handedness.

Naaman's servants had not been personally offended and could view the situation more objectively. Approaching him tenderly they appealed to him to be reasonable. They pointed out that it was not as though Elisha had requested something difficult or some great thing. After all, they had traveled all this distance and time, what harm would there be in giving his remedy a try? So Naaman humbled himself and obeyed the word of the Lord. He and his entourage traveled the 25 miles down to the Jordan River. As he obeyed in faith he was cleansed. God not only healed him but restored his flesh to its soft boyhood texture. God had prescribed that he wash seven times to indicate that the healing was completely a work of God.

The success of Naaman's seven dips in the Jordan transforms his attitude towards Elisha, and Elisha's God.¹ Naaman acknowledged his full belief in the sole supremacy of the God of Israel. The purpose of Naaman's healing from God's point of view was for Naaman, his king, and his people to acknowledge that God was and is the great healer.^{2 3 4}

¹Auld, A Graeme: *I & II Kings*. Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, c1986 (The Daily Study Bible Series), S. 166

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:546

³Keil, Carl Friedrich ; Delitzsch, Franz: *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA : Hendrickson, 2002, S. 3:224-226

⁴Jamieson, Robert ; Fausset, A. R. ; Fausset, A. R. ; Brown, David ; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. 2 Ki 5:1

I am greatly impressed by this Israelite maiden, who was considered a non-person, but property to be used. She, who had been free to play and learn how to be a faithful wife and mother to Israelite children had been taken away from her family, her hopes and dreams, and was now a prisoner and slave. But apparently she was able to keep a positive attitude and allow God to use her to bring faith to Naaman's house. Rather than being hostile and keeping the good news to herself, she shared her beliefs and solutions with others, even the person that was responsible for her current painful situation. Although she was no longer free, she offered a way for her captor to be free from his leprosy.

Other lessons that we learn are:

1. Don't be so sure that you know how God is going to solve a situation in your life. It is easy for us to look at someone else and think we know what God is going to do.
2. Also, too often we think that illness is a punishment, but God can use our situation to help us develop greater faith and trust in our lives and in the lives of others.
3. When God does something for you, you should tell others of the greatness of God! We are to be witnesses to what God had done in our lives. We are often afraid to witness because we don't have some great story to tell. But the slave girl only shared what she believed and the rest is history.
4. Some people will say we are crazy to believe that we obtain salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, but we know that we serve a risen Savior.
5. God is calling us to have faith and share what we know with others. Go tell someone about God. Go share what you know as the good news!