

## **Do You Want to Be Healed?**

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2 Kings 5:1-14

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Today we hear about the encounter between Naaman the Aramean (or Syrian)  
And the prophet Elisha.

To set the stage . . .

The Arameans were nomads from the area now called Syria.

They never unified as a people,  
but their language (Aramaic) was the common language  
throughout the Fertile Crescent by 800 BCE.

The Arameans generally followed the cult religions wherever they lived,  
but they began to become Christians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c CE,  
and most Arameans were Christian by the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

They continued to be the major group in the region of Syria  
until it was conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.  
At that time, the Arameans became a minority  
in terms of both race and religion.

150 years before Naaman,  
when David was king,  
the Israelites fought the Arameans along the northern boundary of Israel  
and defeated them.

After David's victory,  
Damascus had to pay him gold, silver, and bronze in tribute.  
And David controlled most of Aram.

It was just after this conquest  
that David stayed home from the second campaign against the Arameans  
and became involved with Bathsheba.

Now Jeroham is the king of Israel.

Unlike his parents, Ahab and Jezebel,  
he let the prophets, including Elisha, act freely.

On the other hand, his entire 12-year reign is a time of war.  
Eventually, the alliance his father had with Aram breaks down,  
and then, when the alliance among the Aramaic kings breaks down,  
Jeroham will attack Aram

It's a testy time.

Over the years, both sides have taken captives,  
and Naaman's wife has a young Israelite girl as a slave.  
The girl suggests that Naaman, who has "tzaraath" (a skin disease)

could be healed by Elisha.  
The king of Aram values Naaman so much  
that he sends Naaman to Jeroham, the king of Israel.

However, given the tensions of the time,  
Jeroham suspects a pretext on the part of the Arameans.  
Elisha, on the other hand,  
sees this, and seizes this, as an opportunity.

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's house,  
Elisha gives him instructions for healing.  
It turns out that that's not what Naaman wants,  
He wants something else;  
He wants an event.  
But his servants approach him  
and advise him to do this simple thing . . .  
does he really want to be healed?

This really is the question.  
The particular skin disease – tzaraath –  
was thought to be caused by “lashon ha-ra”  
(the “evil tongue,” gossip, speaking badly of others).  
Traditionally, it was held that people who did this  
believed they were above others,  
and were unable to feel the needs of others  
and unable to share the hurts of others.  
To be healed,  
The person with this condition must become humble.  
So, Naaman humbles himself in the eyes of his servants,  
and does as Elisha tells him to do,  
and he is healed.

That is the point.  
So often we do not really want to be healed.

Biblically,  
“salvation” and “healing” are the same word, “yasha”  
which is also the root for Yashua or Jesus.  
Yasha means “to be open, wide” –  
As in, having “room to walk around” –  
this is how we are to be if we are healed, saved:  
wide-hearted, compassionate.  
The opposite of yasha is “mitzrayim”  
which means “tight, narrow places” –  
this is the word that is translated as “Egypt”  
in Hebrew Scriptures

(there is actually no word “Egypt”).

We live in tight, narrow places  
when we live trapped in our fear  
or our pride  
or any of the thousands of ways  
we think we are better than others  
and judge them  
and close our hearts.

It takes a lot to open our hearts.

That’s why, in Jewish tradition,  
the plagues that afflicted the people of Egypt  
were no only meant to get Pharaoh to let the people go,  
they were also meant to get the People of Israel moving,  
because the known slavery of tight, narrow lives  
is far more comfortable  
that the unknowns of God’s freedom  
in the spaciousness of wilderness.  
(Yet we always meet God in the wilderness!)

So, Biblically, the process of being healed and saved,  
Is one of moving from  
being trapped in our “tight narrow places” and points of view  
to living wide, open, compassionate lives in God’s freedom,  
just like Jesus.

Naaman was trapped in his tight, narrow place of pride  
believing he was above and better than others,  
unable to feel the needs of other people,  
and unable to share their hurts.

In the process of humbling himself  
he was healed,  
he was able to live a wider, open life.

A wonderful example of the difference between  
living in mitzrayim, in “tightness,”  
and living in yasha, in “freedom,”  
is Victor Hugo’s story of Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert –  
the story made popular in the musical, *Les Misérables*,  
which some of us saw at West Fargo High this weekend.

As the story begins,  
Jean Valjean is released from the chain gang  
after serving 20 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his nephew.  
Valjean is angry and hardened after his time in prison.  
A bishop gives him food and a place to sleep,

but Valjean steals the bishop's silverware.  
When Valjean is caught by Javert, the police inspector,  
Valjean is shocked because the bishop refuses to condemn him.  
    "I've ransomed you from fear," the bishop tells Valjean,  
        "and now I give you back to God."  
Jean Valjean spends the rest of his life living into that new freedom,  
facing his fears and his faults,  
facing his preconceptions  
    about prostitutes and revolutionaries,  
and living into compassion and kindness.  
He tries to live a life of yasha –  
    healing and salvation,  
        grace and mercy.

And then there is Inspector Javert.  
Javert was born in a prison.  
    His mother was a Gypsy and his father was a galley slave.  
In order to repudiate the humiliation of his birth,  
    he becomes a police inspector.  
        and mercilessly lives by the letter of the law.  
Javert lives in mitzrayim,  
    in that tight place of believing he is better than others,  
        of judging hearts he knows nothing about.  
He spends his life pursuing Jean Valjean  
    because he believes that Valjean is irredeemably evil  
        and he wants to hold Valjean accountable for crimes  
            for which he's already paid the price and more.  
In Javert's eyes,  
    nothing and no one is ever good enough,  
        including himself.  
Law always supercedes grace.

The tables are turned at the barricades.  
Both men are there.  
    Javert is captured by the revolutionaries after he is "outed" as a spy,  
        and Valjean is given permission to kill Javert  
However, Valjean has no intention of killing Javert.  
    Instead, he shows Javert  
        the same compassion he has known and lived into his whole life,  
            and he lets Javert escape.

Javert cannot abide being saved by the person he has spent his life condemning.  
Nor can he understand how Valjean  
    can be both a criminal and a good person.  
        This is not possible!  
Even worse, Javert is caught between morality and law.

He cannot act *lawfully* without acting *immorally*.  
He cannot act *morally* without acting *unlawfully*.  
To do what is moral – to let Valjean go  
Javert has to break the law,  
because anyone who was with the rebels on the barricade  
is to be captured and put to death.  
On the other hand, to do what is lawful – to capture Valjean and return him to prison –  
Javert has to act immorally:  
because Javert knows that the person who saved his life,  
and whom he saw rescue others for no personal gain,  
is not a brutal ex-con.  
Because Javert is trapped in the tight narrow place mitzrayim  
(in his own barricades)  
and cannot believe in yasha –  
in grace and compassion and mercy –  
in healing  
for Valjean or for himself,  
Javert ultimately drowns himself as a way to solve his problem.

How do we deal with our own rigidity  
and tight narrow places  
and keep moving in God's gracious freedom?

How do we move from legalism  
to compassion and empathy?

How do we move from our own right-ness  
to begin able to welcome other points of view?

How do we move from mitzrayim to yasha?

Taking a line from Paul,  
It really does mean believing that all things –  
not *some* things –  
*all* things –  
*even* what we most dislike and despise –  
work together for good.

Think about it:  
believing anything less than this  
sets us up as the judge of all things  
rather than God  
(that was Naaman's problem) . . .  
believing anything less than this  
denies the ultimate, transformative, freeing power of God.

All things, all things do work together for good,  
for God's purposes.

We were all challenged on this in my doctoral program at Ashland Theological Seminary.  
The school has students from 75 denominations

from 4-Square Gospel to United Church of Canada.  
When we wrote papers,  
we were required to read books and articles from all sides on a topic --  
conservative to liberal  
mainline to fundamentalist –  
and if we did not do this,  
our papers were returned to us  
and we were told to start over.

Not only that,  
we began every session with prayer together,  
and listened to each other's joys and hurts.  
Once we were able to do that  
we then began grading each other's papers.  
We didn't always agree, of course,  
and still we came to care for each other  
and we learned to respect each other's points of view.

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A student once came to a monk and said, "I love you."  
The monk asked, "Do you know what hurts me?"  
The student, confused, said, "No."  
The monk replied, "If you do not know what hurts me, you cannot love me."

This is the key to making the move  
from slavery and the tight narrow places of our own mitzrayims/Egypt  
to the freedom of wide open places and God's promised land of yasha/  
of healing, salvation, Jesus . . .

As we heard earlier,  
Valentine cared for his enemies.  
And they cared for him.  
Why was this possible? How could they be this way even in a prison?  
Valentine,  
as a Christian and a doctor,  
had developed the ability  
to care and to understand why and how people were hurting.  
He was able to love them.  
and recognize that he was no better or worse than they were.

Valentine knew that each of us has to be willing, ourselves,  
to be healed of our own close-mindedness,  
and each of us has to be willing, ourselves,  
to be willing to care about the hurts of others,  
in order to be God's agents of healing in the world.

As followers of Jesus  
who are invited every day  
over the barricades and walls we have created for ourselves  
to step into God's gracious freedom . . .  
we are called  
every day  
to love and respect each and every person.  
That is how we are called to work for the reign of God here and now.

And that is why it is no accident that the most famous line of the musical, *Les Misérables*, is:  
"To love another person is to see the face of God."  
Amen.

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#### Texts:

2 Kings 5:1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 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."

But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he 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.

#### Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

#### Luke 4:22-27

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"

And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."