

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“FAMOUS FORGOTTEN HEROES: NAAMAN”

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TEXT: II Kings 5:1-14

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He is definitely a hero in the Bible, but for many of us he is a forgotten hero. He is also an unlikely hero, because he is a general in the army of the Syrians. He is an enemy of God's people. Furthermore, he is arrogant at times. He has an ugly temper. All in all, he is not what you would expect of an authentic hero in the Bible.

Let's look carefully at the story. General Naaman, a celebrity, has just received the news. It's devastating. He has a skin disease, a form of leprosy, which is not only disfiguring. It is humiliating and scary.

Are we surprised when famous people are in pain? Not really. From Howard Hughes to Carlos Zambrano, we see superstars crashing and burning.

So here is the general, the so-called “great man” (v. 1) in Syria. “It's leprosy,” they tell him. He becomes so desperate to find a cure that he will listen to anyone who suggests a miracle cure. We've all heard about so-called “miracle cures” for cancer, costing tens of thousands of dollars, available only in Mexico. Most of us scoff at such stories, unless we are desperate, like General Naaman. He is so desperate, in fact, that he listens to the servant of his wife, a slave girl from Israel, captured in battle. She says: “Down in Israel there is a man of God, a prophet by the name of Elisha. He can cure leprosy.” The general packs his suitcase immediately. He crosses the border into Israel immediately. He will go anywhere, he will do anything to purchase a cure. He takes with him, the Bible tells us, ten talents of silver, 6000 shekels of Gold, plus some fancy clothes. “Whatever it takes, I'll pay,” says the general.

He arrives at the palace of Israel's king, going through diplomatic channels. The king, however, is not amused, telling the general: “We don't have anybody in Israel who can cure leprosy.” The king is spiritually dull, unlike Mrs. Naaman's slave girl. The slave girl is wiser than the king.

In any case, General Naaman finally pulls up at the home of Elisha, the alleged prophet. “I'm here!” declares the general, thinking of himself as a celebrity. But Elisha is not impressed. Instead of coming out to meet the general, Elisha sends one of his servants to tell the “great man”: “Go take a bath in the Jordan River. Do it seven times, and your leprosy will be healed.”

“What?” says the general, who is used to protocol. He is used to red carpets. He is used to being the ultimate VIP. “What? This blankety-blank prophet doesn't have the courtesy to meet with me face to face! This blankety-blank prophet sends a mere servant to address me, a general! This blankety-blank prophet tells me to undress in public and lower myself into this pitiful Jordan River that is nothing compared to the mighty rivers of Syria! Who does he think he is?”

He turns around to go home, cursing, I would imagine, announcing to his retinue: “This so-called man of God is a quack!”

But wait. The question remains: how does this pompous general become a Bible hero? The answer is one word: humility. He makes a simple discovery that changes his life forever. It’s the same discovery that Jesus talked about when he said, “Those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). It’s the same insight that came to King Solomon, after he dedicated the temple in Jerusalem. God spoke to him and said: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (II Chronicles 7:14). Humility is the doorway into life, abundant life with God.

Alcoholics Anonymous knows all about humility. The Twelve Steps of AA begin with the most difficult of all the steps: “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” All of the twelve step programs – AlAnon, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, all of them – begin with that first step of humility.

When my wife and I were much younger, we rented a car in Tel Aviv, so that we could explore the Holy Land. One of my most memorable experiences was in Bethlehem, where the Church of the Nativity, the church built over the traditional site of the manger, has only one door. It’s not a normal door, big enough for LeBron James to walk through. It’s not big enough for me to walk through – or for you, if you are taller than a child. The only way to get inside the Church of the Nativity, the only way to reach the manger, is to stoop, to become like a child.

It happened for General Naaman. When he was enraged about being told to wash in the tiny Jordan River, his servants suggested that he lower himself into the water. “After all,” they told him, “you have nothing to lose.” At that moment – it was a miracle – the “great man” listened to his lowly servants, and his skin became like that of a young boy. He became like a child.

Are you tired of trying to control the universe? The good news is that there is only one God, and you are not the one. I am not the one. But God, the one God, continues to wait for us to surrender ourselves and to humbly ask for the gift of life, new life in God. “Those who humble themselves,” says Jesus, “will be exalted.”