

FAITH HEALING: THE POWER TO HEAL

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2 Kings 5:1-15

Power defines our lives. Every action we take is proportional to the power we possess. We use our power to maximize the results we desire. When we negotiate a deal, we arbitrate with power. Our relationships are sculpted by power. When we approach God, sadly we do so with power.

The reigning monarch of the United Kingdom is Elizabeth II. Queen Elizabeth is 94 years old and has ruled since 1952. She ascended the throne at age 27 upon the death of her father King George VI. Her father's given name was Albert, and if you have watched the movie *The King's Speech*, then you know that Albert suffered from a serious speech impediment—a stammer. This stammer had been a source of embarrassment for him when he needed to speak in public.

Overall, the stammer was not a significant issue since Albert was never expected to become king. He was, in fact, second in line to the throne behind his brother David. But David, in 1936, just eleven months into his reign, famously abdicated the throne so as to marry the American socialite Wallis Simpson.

But even before becoming king, Albert had begun working with a speech therapist, a man named Lionel Logue. In the film, *The King's Speech*, which is about the relationship between these two men, we quickly recognize the presence of power, specifically the power disparity between the king and this commoner.

Mr. Logue knows that he cannot cure a king, but he is able to help a wounded man. To do so he must dismantle the royal ramparts isolating this sovereign. Logue insists on the king coming to him, meeting at his office. Logue addresses the king by his first name. Logue is genuinely empathetic and refuses to be intimidated by the royal imperiousness. In the end, the two men are successful, and the king is able to address his empire with little evidence of his stammer.

Our reading for today, tells of another man of power. He is not a king, but he is his nation's second most powerful person. His name is Naaman and he lived in the ninth century B.C. and he was the commander of the army of the king of Aram. Aram was the nation immediately to the north of Israel in the region that today is Syria.

Naaman had everything. He was a successful military commander. In fact, he had recently defeated the army of Israel in a military campaign. He is described as being a *great man*. In Bible language, "great" means rich. Naaman held the esteem of his king and he was admired by those in his command. They called him *father*. Naaman had it all. But he had too much. He also had leprosy.

Leprosy is a slow-moving, debilitating, painful, and socially isolating disease for which, at that time, there was no known cure. Today, leprosy is known as Hansen's Disease. It is curable with a combination of antibiotics. Sadly, there are still some people in parts of this world who suffer from this ailment because of a lack of access to healthcare.

For Naaman, contracting leprosy altered the trajectory of his life. Despite his power and wealth, there was nothing he could do about his condition. As one writer put it, “His journey into the land of illness had begun.”¹

We can be sure that Naaman searched out every remedy his wealth and resources permitted. He no doubt consulted with the top physicians in his land. He came up empty. One day, however, he is given a lead on a possible cure. This lead comes from an unlikely place. It comes from a slave in his household. This particular slave is a young Israelite girl who had been taken captive during one of Naaman's military incursions. She was a spoil of war and possessed no power. I imagine that she was probably 13 or 14 years old. This young slave girl served Naaman's wife and one day she said to Mrs. Naaman, *If only [your husband] were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.* Samaria, at this time, is the capital city of Israel.

This young girl—a slave, a foreigner, a servant—informs the wife of the second most powerful man in the kingdom about a prophet in Israel who could cure his leprosy. Can you imagine a greater disparity of power? And yet, Naaman listens. I am guessing that he had run out of options.

Naaman informs his king of this news and the king gives him the go-ahead to journey to Israel. The king provides Naaman with a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. Naaman sets out on his journey packing a fortune in gold, silver, and expensive garments. Why does Naaman take so much? Because he thinks in terms of power. He assumes that anyone with the ability to cure his disease must command premium fees. Naaman is willing to pay.

In Israel, Naaman delivers the letter to the king and the king becomes terrified. The letter says, *Know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.*

Now, this is actually funny. Naaman and his king are so myopic that they assumed that this prophet that the young girl spoke of must be the king of Israel. If someone has this power, it stands to reason that they are in charge.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-14-3/commentary-on-2-kings-51-14-6>

The king of Israel is painfully aware that he can't cure leprosy and so he views this request as a pretense by his neighbors to create an incident as an excuse to invade his land. Again, power.

Naaman's arrival at the capital would have been the talk of the town and the leprosy incident reaches the ears of the prophet Elisha. Elisha, as you will recall, received the mantle of prophecy from his predecessor Elijah. Elisha sends word to the king to send Naaman to come so that Naaman *may learn there is a prophet in Israel*.

The next thing we read is this: *So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house*. Now just take a moment and picture this scene in your mind. Naaman does not go by himself like you or I would go to the doctor. He arrives at the home of Elisha accompanied by his retinue of horses and chariots and soldiers. These are weapons of war and blatant displays of his power. I don't believe that Naaman intended to intimidate Elisha or threaten him. I believe that Naaman traveled this way because of who he was. But the disparity of power could not be more evident. It is as if a presidential motorcade with a military escort pulls up in front of a homeless encampment.

So, with Naaman parked out front, you would assume that Elisha would go out and meet him. That is certainly what Naaman expected. But that is not what happens. Elisha simply sends one of his interns with a message for Naaman to go to the Jordan River and *wash seven times*.

Naaman is furious. He expected much more than this. He expected Elijah to come to him and that the prophet would do something impressive like wave his arms and shout incantations and sacrifice an animal or two. A fancy dance would be a nice touch. Naaman wanted his money's worth. And then there is the matter of the Jordan River. It's not really much of a river. Naaman's country has much more impressive rivers. Swimming in the Jordan is an insult.

Naaman is beside himself with rage and is about to storm off when one of his servants begs him to reconsider. *Father, if the prophet had prescribed something difficult, you would have done it. Why can't you just do what is easy?* Because easy does not comport with how Naaman views himself in the world.

But, once again, Naaman listens, and he does as Elisha prescribes and he bathes in the Jordan River. The result is that *His flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy*. He was cleansed.

This story is about healing, but it is also about power. We have two kings and a military general with all the power of their nations, but they lack the power to heal. And when Naaman goes looking for a cure he searches for the power he understands—the power of wealth and force. But the power he needs is the power of

God and God's power comes in forms we don't expect or recognize. Naaman is directed to a cure by a young slave girl; Elisha's servant delivers his remedy; and when he balks at that, it is his own servant that convinces him to take a swim.

And then when Naaman finally washes in the Jordan, he emerges with flesh like that of a *young boy*. He is made new. He is cleansed because he heard the voices of those who hold no power. The healing of Naaman is not just a cure of his disease, but it enables him to see power in a different light—the power of God.

After being cured, Naaman and his entourage return to Samaria. On their first visit, Naaman had been angry that Elisha did not come out and stand before him. This time, Naaman humbly stands before the man of God. Naaman attempts to pay Elisha but Elisha refuses to accept anything. Naaman confesses, *Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.*

This sermon is the second in my Lenten Sermon Series titled Faith Healing. In this series, Michael and I are examining stories of healing that we find in scripture and asking what we can learn from them.

The story of Naaman is a story of power. Naaman was man of power and he conducted himself in terms of power. We are the same way. Every day, in every situation, we assess our power, and we act accordingly.

For Naaman—suffering leprosy—his power failed him. With all that he commanded, he could not obtain healing. It became necessary for him to embark upon a journey toward humility and heed the voices of servants and slaves, to forgo fancy rituals and seek a cure through an ordinary, if not mundane, task. Through these voices Naaman learns to recognize the presence of God.

My challenge to you in this season of Lent is to seek to strip away our reliance on power, to listen to the voices of the marginalized, and to approach each person from a standpoint of humility.

This sermon series is about healing. But healing is not about curing an illness. Healing is about coming to the place where the walls of power and pretention no longer stand, no longer separate us from what is holy. Being humble before God does not mean being weak; it means stripping away our arrogance and pride. Naaman never becomes weak. He does not lose his chariots and horses. He simply learned to submit himself to a different power.

The Season of Lent is a journey from where we are to the resurrection. Our goal in this holy season should be to strip from ourselves the pride and arrogance that keep us from our God, so that when we arrive at Easter we may be humble and ready for our Lord.

Power defines our lives. May this power always be the power of our God.