

“How Dare He?” – 2Ki 5:1-14

We might be inclined to shed a tear for poor Naaman! After all, he was in a bad way, with an apparently unsolvable problem. His skin disease is translated in our reading as ‘leprosy’ but it could be any one of a number of conditions, because the ancient Hebrew term meant just that rather than the specific disease we think of when we hear the word today. The original term meant “defiling skin disease” (see Lev 13:2) and covered all sorts of conditions ranging from a simple rash to superating sores.

But the point of the story is not the exact nature of the disease. From Naaman’s perspective it was incurable, insolvable. It seems a bit unclear if his skin condition affected his religious status the way it normally would have in ancient Israel, but it didn’t seem to have affected his work since he was still identified as the commander of the army of the king of Aram. It also appears, although we are not told explicitly, that the physicians and other medical resources of Aram were not able to deal with his condition. However, a slave girl taken in a raid on Israel came to the rescue, suggesting that if Naaman had access to the prophet in Samaria he would be cured.

Apparently Naaman’s boss, the king of Aram, still respected his commander of the army because he made a very generous offer when Naaman told him what the slave girl had said. The king of Aram not only sent Naaman off to see the king of Israel but also sent with him a veritable treasure. The ten talents of silver and six thousand shekels of gold alone were worth some two million Canadian dollars at today’s prices, never mind what the ten sets of garments might have been worth. A kingly treasure offered to the king of Israel to cure his man.

No wonder the king of Israel had a panic attack! Obviously the Aramite army was a significant force if they were able to inflict raids on Israel and take away slaves and other resources. And here was the commander of that army, treasure loaded on his caravan, asking for the impossible. Of course the king of Israel came to the only obvious conclusion, namely that the king of Aram was trying to pick a fight and start a war. What an international crisis this incident had created! We aren’t told what Naaman’s reaction was to the Israelite king’s response, but I’m sure we can guess he thought his trip had been wasted, although I suspect he still hoped that the king could come up with something.

And just then a solution seemed to arise, for a note came to the king from the prophet Elisha asking him what the big fuss was, and inviting him to send Naaman along to him. And so Naaman shows up at Elisha’s house with the whole caravan in tow. It must have been a grand site with the chariots and wagons rumbling and the horses snorting and the drivers yakking with each other!

But just as soon as the hope of a miraculous solution had arisen it seemed to crumble, for the prophet didn’t even bother to come to the door. Instead he sent a servant to bring a simple message – can you imagine? It’s kind of like the servant peeking over the chain on the door telling this extremely powerful man, “he says go wash seven times in the Jordan and everything will be OK.”

Hardly what this most powerful man was expecting, was it? As commander of the king’s army he would have been accustomed to great pomp and circumstance – orders being read from the king heralded by horns and drums and great commotion. Naaman knew that anything as serious as solving his unsolvable problem would require similar great pronouncements, and fanfare, and direct involvement by important people. We know that he was angry, because we are told that we went away muttering about exactly that; “How dare he?!” “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 defiling skin disease!" Ah, poor Naaman.

But how often do we find ourselves in Naaman's position? Life is full of issues and problems, and sometimes it seems that there is no solution available, and so we turn to God looking for satisfaction. How often do we then look for the same kind of response from God that Naaman looked for from Elisha? Difficult rituals, exhausting incantations, huge sacrifices, all in order to invoke big miracles accompanied by lightning and thunder and deep voices from heaven and sweetly-singing angels and earthquakes and poof – everything's better! How many times like Naaman have you felt that God was ignoring your requests, that you weren't getting what you prayed for?

Naaman certainly felt like that at first, but by the grace of God came to understand exactly what Elisha had intended when the prophet told the king of Israel to send Naaman to him, namely "that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." Now at first glance that might seem a bit self-aggrandizing on Elisha's part, but once you recall what Elisha and all Israel understood a prophet to be – a person who conveys God's message to the people – then his purpose can legitimately be reworded as, "that he may learn that God indeed speaks through his prophet in Israel." Naaman finally, under urging from his servants, did as he was told and his 'defiling skin disease' completely disappeared. If you read on in 2 Kings you'll discover that Naaman goes on to proclaim his undying faithfulness to the Lord God of Israel.

Now, how about us? Are we, like Naaman, able to eventually recognize that our prayers are indeed being answered even if not in the way that we think we need to tell God to answer them? I think most if not all of us can admit that often when we pray we tell God what we think we need as a solution to the problem at hand, but that also often we fail to recognize that God has answered us with what we need, not necessarily what we wanted.

The example of this that I like the best is in the form of a joke that many of you have heard me tell before. To set the mood and just to lighten things up a bit I'll tell another one first that has nothing to do with our text – this one is purely for fun:

An old man lay sprawled across three entire seats in the movie theater. When the usher came by and noticed this, he whispered to the old man, "Sorry sir, but you're only allowed one seat."

The old man just groaned but didn't budge. The usher became more impatient. "Sir, if you don't get up from there I'm going to have to call the manager." Once again, the old man just groaned.

The usher marched briskly back up the aisle, and in a moment he returned with the manager. Together the two of them tried repeatedly to move the old disheveled man, but with no success. Finally they summoned the police.

The officer surveyed the situation briefly then asked, "All right buddy what's your name?" "Frank," the old man moaned. "Where ya from, Frank?" asked the police officer.

With terrible pain in his voice, and without moving a muscle, Frank replied, "The balcony."

Ok, let's get back on topic now with my joke about answered prayer (with apologies to all those who have suffered this Spring from flooding) ...

A man (we'll call him Frank) was on the front porch of his house as the flood waters were rising, and prayed to God, "please save me!" Just then a truck

came by and the people called out, “jump in!” Frank replied, “go save someone else – I’ll put my faith in God.”

The waters rose, and now Frank is hanging out of a second-floor window when a boat came by. The people called to Frank, “get in!” but Frank replied, “no thanks, I’ll put my faith in God.”

The waters continued to rise, and now Frank is on the roof when a helicopter hovers over him, and a voice calls out from the loudspeaker, “get in the basket!” Frank waves them off, saying, “I’ll put my faith in God.”

The waters continued to rise, and Frank drowned. In heaven Frank was sitting moping when God walked by, and Frank went “harrumph!” God stopped to ask what was the matter, and Frank said, “well, I put my faith in you, and look what happened!” God paused for a moment, and then said kindly, “I sent you a truck, a boat, and a helicopter ... what more did you want?”

It’s an old Reader’s Digest joke but I think it conveys very well the point the Naaman incident was making, namely that God does indeed answer our prayers but not always, probably rarely, perhaps never in the ways that we have told God to answer our prayers. But answer them God does! So go ahead and pray and even ask in the ways with which you are familiar, but also be on the lookout for answers that you never expected – no lightning bolts, no earthquakes, just that whatever problem(s) you were facing have now eased, and once again you are reassured that God hears your prayers, answers your prayers, and most of all, continues to care for you. Pray, and then listen and watch.