

Dip Seven Times

Text: II Kings 5: 1-14

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June 9, 2013

My best friend Pam is a voracious reader. If leisure should find her some afternoon, you can bet that she will be reading her Nook, deeply absorbed in a story and a world far from our living room. She takes particular delight in books of the complex and archetypal variety, filled with character development, thick with symbolism, historical reference, twists and turns, foreshadowing and fulfillment.

I, on the other hand, look for stories more of the linear, quick-and-easy sort! I favor stories that are more single-track: human-interest stuff, biography and inspiration. I especially like happy and hopeful endings. If a story takes me on too many tangents, I get distracted and weary. Sometimes I can even find myself reading the same sentence for the fifth time over and having some vague sense that things are sounding familiar!

Well . . . of all good news for today, our passage from the Bible is one that works for both of us! It is thick with symbolic layers for Pam . . . but also inspiring, over-easy and happy in the end for me! It's a time-worn, archetypal narrative for Pam, filled with power and personality, greed and redemption, hint and resolution . . . and yet a curious, simple narrative for me, brimmed with a lesson of finding healing and hope.

The story centers around a man named Naaman and it is told in the deep pages of Hebrew scripture. If Pam had the chance to tell it, you would hear the thick-layered version. But I want to give you the more linear, point-A-to-point-B "Geordie version" without all the complications!

Naaman was a famous general in the Syrian Army, honored and revered as a great man by the ruler at the time, whose name was King Ben-Hadad. But Naaman had a problem. He suffered badly from leprosy, a disease with significant social stigma associated with death. He wanted very much to be healed and he had tried nearly everything that his privilege and position could make possible.

Along his way, Naaman heard tell of a prophet in Israel by the name of Elisha, who could provide for his healing. And so he asked his commander-in-chief, King Ben-Hadad, for permission to go and search for this prophet. The King gladly gave his full blessing. Actually, that's putting it mildly: not only did the king send Naaman with his blessing, but also with all sorts of things that he thought might be helpful: horses and chariots, silver and gold worth a virtual fortune, impressive garments - and also a letter of endorsement from the king, himself, to whomever Naaman needed to impress.

So it was that Naaman went on his way searching for Elisha. But, when he got to the land along the Jordan River, none of this wealth-to-purchase or power-to-influence held any sway. Instead, Elisha, the prophet of God whom Naaman found, simply instructed: "Go wash in the Jordan seven times; your flesh shall be restored and you will be healed." Naaman was incensed! He had traveled all of this way and was not to be ridiculed by such a benign response. After all, he had

the endorsement of the great King of Syria - Ben-Haddad - and more wealth to buy his way to healing than any prophet could imagine. Still, Elisha could not be persuaded or enticed from his simple instruction: "Go wash in the Jordan seven times!"

Naaman was dumb-founded! He wondered out loud to his servants, though he was rarely one to listen to any who were beneath him. One of his subordinates posed the question: "Sir, if the prophet Elisha had asked for something much larger, surely you would have done it. So why not this easier, less complicated remedy?" It was an unexpected moment of humbling. So Naaman went to the Jordan River, immersed himself seven times, and his flesh was restored to that of a young boy and he was healed.

He and all of his entourage were converted on the spot. Elisha, who spoke for the God of Israel, had not left them disappointed!

Sometimes, sometimes stories in the Bible are called "thick passages" with layers of meaning that are intertwined and co-mingled. But sometimes, sometimes those same stories have "thinner messages" too and just as important. Transportable lessons. Transforming lessons. Take-away and keep-in-your-pocket lessons. Hands-on-right-now lessons.

So, let me simply ask a few questions to bring Naaman's story closer, thick or thin, according to your favor. Because it is told in scripture for our benefit and yours and mine.

*Is there some need in your life to be healed in some manner - as for Naaman?
Some something that you just wish you could wake up fresh from and walk away?*

*Are there places where you might be blocking your own healing, your own well-being,
by making things far more complicated than they need to be?*

*Can you imagine that there are gifts God might have in store for you
if you were able to humble-down some, as Naaman did?
If you were to say, as he did, "Never mind buying my way,
I just want to be well."*

How might the healing power of life be waiting for your next move?

*And last, but certainly not least, can this be, will this be, might this be the
summer when you chose, metaphorically speaking, to dip seven times in the Jordan?*

I leave you to wonder about such things, with the story told for all of us, thick or thin, in the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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