

Trust in Me – Pent+7C

A wealth of stories we have to think about this morning. Let's start with the first one: Naaman, the great general with deep flaws. Goodness knows how many stories in all of our narrative traditions are about characters like this. That is because humanity is full of characters whose lives demonstrate that being powerful and famous doesn't make you good or happy. To quote the Gershwins, "the man who only lives for making money, lives a life that isn't necessarily sunny; likewise the man who works for fame: there's no guarantee that time won't erase his name." We hear of this in song and story, and we hear about it in the news of our own day.

Thus, Naaman: Power, prestige, wealth and pride, but itchy. He's got an itch he just can't scratch.

I can relate. As you know, I have spent the past year with an itch I could not scratch by myself. With the help of immensely learned folks and almost unimaginable technology, it seems to be going away for now, but only after I put myself in their hands and consented to have unspeakably humbling – and uncomfortable – scratching done to my old corpus. With thanks to Science for the means of healing, with thanks to you and all the people involved in supporting, transporting, and caring about and for me, giving me the opportunity to heal, and with thanks to God for the motivation to be well, my itch is getting scratched for me.

Somehow, Naaman is able to hear the still small voice that tells him, "There is one who can help you." Bear in mind, it can be a far greater challenge for a big shot to hear a little voice than for the rest of us. So his story takes on extra intensity. That he

allows the advice of a captive serving girl to affect and guide him is miraculous in and of itself.

Naaman serves a king. And this king is a big king. He's so big that he orders other littler kings around. The big king dashes off a letter to a littler king saying, "Take care of my man, Naaman." And Naaman sets off for the littler king's kingdom – Samaria -- where the healing is supposed to take place.

What follows are a couple of brief comedy sketches. Storytellers clearly enjoy the discomfort and folly of powerful people. The littler king freaks out because he thinks he's being tricked into a quarrel with the big king, who may be looking for an excuse to overthrow him. He doesn't even consider the possibility of trying to help Naaman at first. Then when Naaman hears the treatment that Elisha prescribes as a cure, he has a temper tantrum of his own. "This is stupid! Our rivers are just as good back home; who is this person who orders me to bathe seven times!? In each case, cooler, humbler heads prevail and the big shots are talked down from their self-righteous – and self-destructive -- ledges. Elisha agrees to look into Naaman's problem, and Naaman's servants calm their master down. They put things into perspective for him and save him from himself: if he wants to scratch, he'd better cooperate. Sure enough, into the drink he goes, all leprous and miserable, and out he comes just lovely, ready to audition for Ivory Soap. He is cured.

We don't get a formula, or an explanation of why this big shot is able to hear the small voices that lead to his salvation. We only know that he does listen and, when he listens it makes all the difference in his life. It is the wisdom of the peripheral and powerless that saves the great and powerful. Perhaps not a clear formula, but we do get some clues about to bring about

healing change, how he becomes able, not only to ‘scratch the unscratchable itch,’ but remove the itch entirely. First the captive servant girl has him humble himself – no easy feat for a cat like Naaman.

And Elisha – oh the gall, the chutzpah! He doesn’t even come out of his house to see Naaman. He sends a messenger out instead to talk to him. Major diss. “Tell him to go swimming’. Tell Naaman to go jump in a lake – ok a river. But it’s just Elisha’s way of sparking humility in the General, and so perhaps we can conclude that it is at least partly the humility that cleanses, heals and saves him – from the inside out. It must have been something to see this big, powerful guy get down, get naked, get in the river and be transformed.

His flesh was restored to that of a young boy. Oh the delight of that sense memory – how it feels to kiss the cheeks and trumpet the belly of your soft little fellow (after a bath, of course, when all the jelly and spaghetti sauce and goodness knows what-all else are washed away!) It is a sublime experience to be the kisser of such a one, and the story is telling us that it is very much a miraculous state to be that kissable one too. Naaman is made new by his humility.

He is made new and his priorities change. “Now I know there is no God other than the God of Israel.” That’s his new story and he’s sticking to it. As the proverb says, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and humility goes before honor.” So it is now with Naaman. Fear (as in respect) for God supercedes all other obligations and hierarchies. And only through humility is his new, true honor attained. First things first. If I’ve got an itch I can’t scratch, go to the people around me who know and ask for their suggestions. And if there aren’t any around, find some.

Pretty good turnaround for a guy who's used to throwing soldiers and shekels and letters from kings at his problems.

Blessed are the meek, says Jesus, for this very reason. This doesn't mean anything like letting ourselves be doormats or martyrs or pushovers. It does mean putting people in our lives whom we truly admire and trust, and then taking their suggestions once in awhile.

Naaman's trusted servants ask him, "If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? All he asked you to do was go swimming! Sure, it's a risk. He might be standing there naked, getting in and out of the Jordan seven times and only getting wet. But he takes the risk, humbles himself and gets a lot more than wet, he gets well.

So, Naaman. Able? Yes. Ablest man in all of Aram. Ready? Absolutely. He goes down to Samaria ready for anything, coffers full and highly motivated – sick and tired of having an itch he can't scratch. But is he willing? For the longest time, no. He has too many social, political, financial and professional obligations. He has too many chariots and too much money – too many closets full of clothes. His life is too noisy and busy; he's too wound up. But, but the day does dawn when he is ever so slightly willing, and that makes all the difference. He's ever so slightly willing to take a suggestion from a small voice, to humble himself and Boom! he gets his miracle.