

February 4, 2018 – Soli Deo Gloria
By Wayne J. Schneider

The Easy Way or the Hard Way

2 Kings 5:1-14

It is possible that Naaman had poison ivy. Or acne. Or athlete's foot, or a fungus, or even 'the heartbreak of psoriasis. Whatever it was, it was certainly not Hansen's disease, what today is called "leprosy:" that disfiguring illness that eats away fingers and faces and forces people into colonies. Whatever the general had, all the king's horses and all the king's men could not control the itch, or allow him sleep at night. Nothing worked: not cream, powder, or poultice. The powerful Syrian Military Man was conquered by a rash.

And yet, there may be an upside to this story. Generals are often 'cranky,' and perhaps this irritation helped make him a terror to his enemies. Here he was, at his wit's end and out of ideas. Naaman's wife didn't know what to do, either. She had opined oatmeal baths, but Naaman said he would rather itch. She makes a pilgrimage to the temple at Hadad, giving an extra offering to the priest, who promises extra prayer for Naaman's skin; but no relief.

At about the time she decides to run to mom's house for a long visit, her slave girl tells her that, back in the old country, there is a prophet who can heal Naaman just like that! Girl tells wife. Wife tell general. General tells king. King sends Naaman, with appropriate letters, to Israel. Naaman loads up his chariot with money, clothes, and gifts for the prophet.

Naaman stops by the king of Israel's house on the way, and gives him the letters his own king had sent; and Israel's king goes bonkers, tears his clothes, and cried like a baby, *"Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy! He is trying to pick a fight with me!"*

The prophet Elisha, meanwhile, can barely stifle a laugh when he is told what happened with the king. A slave-girl directing a king, the Hebrew king crying like a

baby. No one knowing what to do next. So, Elisha tells the Israeli king, *“Cool it! Don’t rip your clothes. Send him to me.”*

Naaman and his staff go to Elisha’s house with an impressive display of wealth and power. Normal people would be impressed, maybe in awe, but Elisha doesn’t even put down his paper or get out of his chair. He sends his servant to tell the general to go and take a bath in the Jordan River. . . better yet, take seven of them.

Naaman is enraged, and understandably so. A dermatological irritation is one thing; this kind of exasperation is another. The king is expecting a gesture, an incantation, or at least some r.e.s.p.e.c.t. And all he receives is a ‘guest pass’ to the Jordan, a second rate river at that. The general pitches a hissy fit, and it is amazing that he doesn’t burn down the prophet’s house and return home, scratching all the way.

But, Naaman’s servants come to him saying, *“Father, if the prophet had asked you do to something hard, would you have done it?”* This is a small opening, allowing us to view a side of the general that is softer than his rage and reputation. The general’s answer is, of course, yes. Ultimately, all of us are sometimes ready to do the hard thing. *“So why not do the easy thing?”* Truly, why not? Down to the river the general goes, and seven times he takes a bath, and after the seventh bath his skin is as smooth as a baby’s butt.

This morning’s lesson ends here, but not the story. Naaman returns to Elisha’s house, and tries to give the prophet every gift he brought, plus everything he brought with him. Elisha refuses. He as much as says, *“I’m not a witch doctor. The power belongs to God, not me. If you want to make an offering, give your gifts to God.”*

The general says, *“Okay, then give me something,”* which is a spectacular request, coming from one who is used to taking what he wants, whether slave girls or territories. *“Let me take some of the earth, two mule-loads, so that I can kneel on it when I pray. I will worship no other God but yours, the Lord.”* Elijah agrees and

tells him to go in peace.

I love this story, it is fun and filled with irony. Still, if we go below the surface of the narrative we discover all sorts of difficulties, at least for those who claim God's favor. That a non-believing general can be a tool in the hand of God to humble God's own people. That God might give preferential treatment to a 'foreigner,' rather than to one of God's chosen people. That the upper classes are finally dependent on the lower classes and quite unable to heal themselves. No wonder then, when Jesus reminds the people in his hometown synagogue, that "*there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet, but God healed none of them, only Naaman the Syrian,*" they very nearly killed him for saying so. (St. Luke 4:27) Alleluia. Amen.