

## Wholeness and Holiness

Joyce Hollyday

2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

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Tonight we encounter two stories about “leprosy.” In biblical times, the term was used to denote several disfiguring skin conditions. The bottom line about “leprosy” was that it brought upon the one who suffered from it the label “unclean.”

And so there is a certain irony that Namaan was struck with this disease. He was a powerful man, the commander of the huge and victorious army of Aram – present-day Syria, the site once again of repressive violence that makes the news. During Namaan’s successful raid on the land of Israel, he captured, among others, a young girl whom he enslaved and handed over to his wife.

We don’t know her precise age – or her name. She was unlike Namaan in every way: conquered rather than conqueror, young, female, wrenched away from her home against her will. Her childhood was cut short, and overnight she became a slave in a foreign land, seemingly powerless. I wonder how deep was her sadness, how intense her loneliness and longing for her family and her home and her people. I imagine that if I were her and I heard the news of Namaan’s illness, I would have thought something along the lines of “Serves him right.”

If that had been the case, I’m pretty sure we would never have heard of Namaan. He would have been just one more military general. But the slave girl – let’s call her Hasia, which in Hebrew means “have mercy” – Hasia felt differently: “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

Namaan, obviously desperate, spoke to the king of Aram about the young girl’s words, and the king sent him off with some silver and gold and the latest Aramean fashions, along with a letter of reference on the general’s behalf for Israel’s king. Now, the king of Israel responded as most of us would have. Well, OK, maybe we wouldn’t have torn our clothes, but we likely would have said something along the lines of “What is he up to? He’s trying to pick a fight.” This conquering general, the enemy, showing up here and looking for a favor? I don’t think so.

But the prophet Elisha, closer in spirit to Hasia than the king, said, “Bring him on. Let him see what I can do.” So Namaan arrived at the prophet’s house, less than subtly, with all his horses and chariots and servants. Elisha sent a messenger to him with these instructions: “Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

Well, predictably, Namaan was offended. He muttered, “I thought at least he’d come out and see me, wave his hand around a few times and do his magic. And aren’t our rivers back home in Aram better than all the mud holes of Israel? Why didn’t I just dip in one of them? What a waste of time.” He stomped away, says our scripture, “in a rage.”

And, once again, the humble servants owned the wisdom. “If he had told you to do something difficult, wouldn’t you have done it? This is a piece of cake. Just go to the river.” Healing doesn’t always have to be hard.

So Namaan relented and went and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan. And immediately his flesh became “like that of a young boy.” He was healed.

Our lectionary passage ends before the conclusion of the story. Namaan, overjoyed, claims belief in Israel’s God and tries to hand over the gifts to Elisha, who refuses them – twice. So Namaan says, “Well then, how about if *you* give *me* two mule-loads of dirt?” He believes that he needs to stand on Israel’s soil to worship God, and he wants to take a piece of Israel back to Aram with him.

He also asks Elisha to forgive him for the times that he will bow down before his king’s deities – only because his job requires it, and his king, apparently elderly, needs him to lean on when he goes to worship his gods – but Namaan won’t really mean it anymore. I imagine a mirthful smile on Elisha’s face as he says to the general, “Go in peace.” I think he really means it.

But there’s still more. Elisha’s servant Gehazi thinks Elisha let Namaan off too easily and runs after him. “Is everything all right?” Namaan wants to know, climbing down from his chariot. Gehazi makes up a lie about other prophets coming to visit and says, “We really could use some of that silver and clothing.”

When Gehazi returns, Elisha asks where he’s been, and he says, “Your servant has not gone anywhere at all.” Bad move. Elisha knows it’s a lie and says to Gehazi, “Therefore the leprosy of Namaan

shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever.” Yikes. “So,” says the last verse of the chapter, his servant “left his presence leprous, as white as snow.”

Immediately following this story is one that I know is a favorite of Ken’s. The Arameans are attacking Israel again, God strikes them blind, and the king of Israel asks Elisha if he can kill them all. Elisha answers, “No! Throw them a party. Give them a feast.” Which is exactly what happened. That story ends with these words: “And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.”

I love that story, too. It carries the same message as the story of the healing of Namaan: treating enemies with respect and mercy is a far better and more reliable form of security than making war on them. It also reminds us that transformation doesn’t happen overnight.

I would really have liked for Namaan to have gone back home after his visit to Elisha, freed the slave girl Hasia, put down his weapons, and convinced every other Aramean general and their king that raiding Israel makes no sense. I would have liked for him to have launched a traveling road show throughout Aram, with his healed, flesh-like-a-young-boy body as Exhibit #1, showing the Arameans this proof of the mercy and goodness and miraculous faith of Israel.

But it took a second act of mercy by Elisha for the message to take root. I wonder how many people said to the prophet when the Arameans showed up again with war on their minds, “See, mercy doesn’t work. Nonviolence is naïve, and reconciliation impossible.” Elisha may have been tempted to order all the Aramean soldiers killed when he had the chance. But he persisted in the way of God as he understood it. “And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.”

The Namaan story still isn’t over, in that Jesus makes note of it in his inaugural sermon, but I’ll come back to that.

Our gospel lesson for tonight is also about a person suffering from leprosy. Jesus had already healed a man with an “unclean spirit,” and Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, and many others who were sick with various diseases who had been brought to him. The man with leprosy had apparently heard of Jesus’ reputation, and he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Verse 41 says that, “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand to him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’”

A footnote in my study Bible says that some ancient authorities read “Moved by *anger*,” Jesus reached out and healed the man. I certainly believe that Jesus felt pity and compassion for this man who, labeled “unclean,” was relegated to the margins of his community, unable to worship and socialize as others did. But I also believe that Jesus was moved by anger – anger at a system that divided people into clean and unclean, holy and sinful, friend and foe, family and foreigner. What better scapegoat for the pronouncements of the protectors of “purity” than one who was visibly disfigured by disease.

Jesus asked two things of this man. One was to show himself to the priest and participate in the ritual of cleansing commanded by Moses. Now, this was no small thing. If you turn to the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus, you’ll find the details. The eight-day ritual involved birds, lambs, cedar wood, crimson yarn, the herb hyssop, shaving off all hair including the eyebrows, blood and oil on the right earlobe and big toe, and emptying, dismantling, cleansing, and replastering one’s home if leprosy was discovered there.

By comparison, the second command seems relatively easy: Do not say anything to anyone about your healing. Our passage says Jesus “sternly warned” the man. Once again, a footnote offers some enlightenment, stating that the Greek words mean literally Jesus “snorted” these words to the man. I never actually imagined Jesus snorting, but the point is that the command was delivered with intensity.

We don’t know if the man ever showed himself to the priest, but we do know that he couldn’t contain the joy he felt about his healing. “He went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word,” verse 45 says, “so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country.” Exactly what Jesus was hoping to avoid – at least for a while.

So let’s back up a moment and look at the sermon that launched Jesus’s ministry, preached in Nazareth, his hometown. You probably remember that he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read these words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” (Luke 4:18)

You may remember that all the hometown folks in the synagogue were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” and “spoke well of him.” But their admiration turned quickly to dangerous scorn when Jesus added a P.S. to his sermon. He mentioned the widow of Zarephath, who fed the prophet Elijah from the last of her food, and our friend Namaan. “There were many lepers in Israel

in the time of the prophet Elisha,” said Jesus, “and none of them was cleansed except Namaan the Syrian.”

The next verse comes as a shock: “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill...so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

Apparently it was too much for these folks that Jesus held up the lives of a starving widow and a leprous Syrian – both foreigners to Israel – as examples of faithfulness and courage. This just didn’t compute with their understanding of being the chosen of God, or their beliefs about purity and faith. Thankfully, Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

In all these stories, faith was found on the margins – in a girl enslaved in a foreign land, the spoils of war; in two men riddled with leprosy; in a Son of God whose first crib was an animal feeding trough, who lived homeless among the outcasts, whose life ended with a criminal execution.

I want to end with a story that was shared two weeks ago by Bryan Stevenson at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Open Door Community in Atlanta. Bryan has worked for years as a lawyer defending prisoners on death row. Most recently he has taken on the heartbreaking work of defending children in prison. His current case is a 13-year-old whose father had brutally abused his mother for years. One night, when his mother was unconscious from his blows, and his father was passed out in a drunken stupor, the boy picked up his father’s gun, shot and killed him. Because his father was a sheriff’s deputy, this 13-year-old was given a sentence of life in prison.

Bryan was raised in a household that included his siblings, his parents, and his grandmother, who was the daughter of slaves. When Bryan was about 9, he noticed his grandmother watching him. One afternoon she invited him out to the porch, sat him down, and said to him, “Bryan, I’ve noticed that you are a very special boy. I want you to promise me three things.” The three things were 1) “Always love your mother” (Bryan adored his mother, so that wasn’t hard to agree to); 2) “Always do the right thing, even if it isn’t easy” (Bryan at 9 didn’t imagine how hard this could be, so he assented); and 3) “Don’t ever let a drop of alcohol pass through your lips” (That too didn’t seem difficult, so he agreed).

A few years later, when Bryan was about 14, some of his older cousins gathered behind the barn with a six-pack of beer. “Go ahead and try it,” they coaxed him. He said no. “Aw, come on,” they insisted. Bryan refused several more times. Finally one of them grinned and said, “Are you still trying to keep that promise we made to Grandmother?”

Turns out, of course, that every one of them had received the “You are special” speech. And, of course, each of us *is* special. And so is every other child of God.

I think of the lepers in Jesus’s day, who were obligated to yell “Unclean, unclean!” whenever anyone came near – as a warning of their condition. And of those folk gathered in the synagogue who thought they alone had pure faith. I think it’s part of the human condition to bounce back and forth between these feelings of unworthiness and specialness.

Bryan’s grandmother had it right. We are all humans, tempted at times to do the wrong thing. And we are all the special, beloved children of God. What gets us through is grace.

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When we know how much we need God’s grace and mercy, it only makes sense to extend these to others. As Hasia the slave girl did to Namaan the enemy commander. As Elisha did to the enemy soldiers. As Jesus did to the hard-hearted ones who wanted to hurl him off a cliff.

Jesus desires for each of us the wholeness he granted the man with leprosy. He invites us all into the wholeness in which divisions dissolve: no clean and unclean, no holy and sinful, no friend and foe, no family and foreigner. May we strive in this Circle of Mercy to make it so.

Amen.