
Mighty Suffering

2 Kings 5:1-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 3, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Life can shock us sometimes. We're not shocked that the Duke Men's basketball team went to the NCAA tournament again this past year. We're used to that. We're not shocked when some first year Duke basketball players do the 'one and done,' and play one year in college then enter the NBA draft.

And I'm not surprised by what students may say from time to time. I remember what I was like as a middle school and high school student. Let's just say I *wasn't* living up to my middle name—Anthony, which means 'highly praiseworthy.' I was more like these two students: One student was asked where his homework was by his teacher and he replied, "It's still in my pencil." Another student was performing Mozart in a middle school chorus class. But after a few tries, this frustrated student raised her hand and told the teacher, "We want to sing music from our generation, not yours." These don't shock me, as I know my own devilish history. We probably aren't even shocked when we hear of another terrorist bombing somewhere in the world or another horrific school shooting. We might be numb but this doesn't surprise us anymore really.

However, shockwaves may shake our bodies when you get a call in the night that a long time friend died in a tragic car accident or when you go to a doctor for a regular routine check up and leave that appointment with a diagnosis of stage four cancer. Or, more recently, you go to Disney World expecting a magical experience in Cinderella's kingdom, and walk by a seemingly harmless lagoon, but an alligator snatches your two year old to his death. Now, these may shock you. Unexpected news and situations in life, now and then.

The biblical newsflash about Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, may also shock us. The history of biblical interpretation highlights how Naaman's washing and cleansing is a type of our own baptism in which we are made clean, not from leprosy, but from the disease of sin. Maybe for some, that's surprising but not for most of us probably. The Bible contains many stories of healing and cleansing. This is nothing new. So what I want to talk about this morning is not necessarily Naaman's healing or cleansing but his suffering.

If we had ancient near eastern ears, one sentence may shock us, jolting us into the truth. "The man [Naaman], though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy." Here he "was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram." Everything is great. Things are looking up for him and his career. He's the epitome of success. He can do nothing wrong but something is wrong. Everyone thought he was Mr. Perfect of the Syrian army but then we learn that though he was a mighty warrior, he suffered from leprosy. Though mighty, Naaman suffered. You really can't judge a book by its cover. The meaning of the name "Naaman" is 'pleasantness' but his skin disease is anything but pleasant. It's funny how we think the powerful never experience pain.

Maybe this story of Naaman will shock us out of thinking that those who seemingly have everything, at least access to power, never experience "the worst of times"(Charles Dickens). Naaman's might didn't make him immune to suffering. Rather, what we see is that where there is great power there can also be great suffering. Being a great leader, being a superpower, having a great mind, is not an exemption from the diagnosis of suffering—just ask Steve Jobs of Apple. Naaman's situation shocks us back into the truth of human life. We may idolize the powerful and prestigious but we should never forget that they, we, too, have human limitations. One can be strong in one area and weak in another. Just because you are mighty doesn't mean you are strong enough to heal yourself.

Fly-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee-Muhammad Ali is an example. The man, though a great heavyweight boxer, suffered from Parkinson's disease. Lou Gehrig, though a hall of fame baseball player, suffered from ALS and the shorthand name for that disease is 'Lou Gehrig's disease.' Pain can accompany power and might. We may think when one is powerful that they are sans pain but the Naamans of society understand that there are costs that come with power. Health experts tell us about the role stress plays in creating health issues and those with power and might may wield apparent strength but the stress of productive and influential agency may produce unforeseen consequences. Not that Naaman's might created his suffering but that even the mighty are human and experience suffering along with all of creation. It's inevitable. Leaders know this.

There's a Duke PhD student in English, Israel Durham, researching the linkage between genius and melancholy. You may admire great thinkers or leaders and think "Wow!" but you don't know what they have to endure behind closed doors. Four iconic world leaders are case in point. Abraham Lincoln experienced some personal tragedies in his life like the death of his sister and a close friend, which led to bouts of depression. It was so bad at times that his friends would lock him up to prevent derangement or even suicide. In Boris Johnson's biography of Winston Churchill called *The Churchill Factor*, he notes that Churchill, though a great wartime leader, took up writing as "a way to keep 'the black dog' of depression at bay." Churchill even admits that at times light faded from the picture of his life so much so he didn't like to stand by the edge of a train platform because he was unsure of what he would do. The shadow of depression followed him through his illustrious career. And even according to a 1968 Time Magazine profile, the esteemed civil rights leader and Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., attempted to commit suicide twice before the age of 13, following the death of his grandmother; consider the suffering he endured to get to the point of saying, "I have a dream." Even Princess Diana, though mighty in her own way, after marrying the heir to the British throne, endured so much pressure, leading to depression and a struggle with bulimia.

"[Naaman], though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy." Even mighty nations suffer—loss of civilians from the brutality of war or deep political tensions and divides over immigration or whether to stay in the EU or not. Powerful nations suffer from the disease of racism or economic disparities despite what they appear to be on the surface in the public eye. You can be great in one way and horrible in another.

People of faith are not immune either. The apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh that was never removed although he asked God three times to remove it (2 Cor 12). He was probably the greatest missionary in the history of the Church but he suffered on many levels. Jesus, though he was God, according to writer Frederick Buechner, was "the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The one with the cauliflower ear and the split lip. By whose swollen eye and ruptured spleen we are somehow healed." No matter how mighty you are or who you are (even God), you will suffer.

Naaman not only suffers though being mighty in one way, he comes to realize that his might or power can't heal him. He's not self-salvific or self-sufficient or self-redeeming. He was successful as an army commander but can't find a remedy for his own illness. He destroyed armies but couldn't destroy this disease on his own terms. Once he hears that a prophet can cure his leprosy, he takes money to the king of Israel but he soon finds out that you can't buy God or purchase your healing. And when he goes to Elisha, the prophet, Elisha sends a messenger out to him who tells him to wash in the Jordan seven times. As one commentator notes he presents an egocentric and ethnocentric objection to this process for healing. Naaman was angry and said, "I thought that for me he [the prophet] 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 leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" Naaman wants his healing on his own terms—the prophet, not a mere messenger, the river of Damascus not the Jordan. Eventually he dips seven times in the Jordan and "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." He's healed but it wasn't the means he would have chosen.

He might have been mighty but in relation to his own healing, he wasn't in control. Some things you can't control no matter how powerful you may feel. His healing comes through surprising means and he realizes that we don't get to choose how we get healed. Our power, if we have any, can't dictate the method of healing because there are limits to human power and what the powerful can do. You can't buy healing or God. Though well-educated, successful, upper middle class, popular with over a million Twitter followers, you can't buy joy or gentleness. You can't purchase a life in the Spirit or the love of God. You have to lose control, lose your life in order to gain it, and be willing not to have things your way or on your own terms. This is difficult for those with power and in power.

Naaman had to learn this, which is why he was enraged. The mighty want to be in control and command how things should occur. 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes is best known for his statement —“I think therefore I am.” The rational, individual, in-control-of-the-universe “I” of the Enlightenment. Basically, I am in control, not God's self-identification and affirmation, “I am that I am” (Exod 3:14). It's more like the poem, “Invictus,” by William Ernest Henley, “I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.” But Naaman discovers, even before it is ever written in the sacred scriptures, that it is “I not I but Christ...”(Galat 2:20). The mighty cannot always be in control and in charge of their future. This is a hard lesson for anyone but especially those who hold and wield power.

Not only is Naaman out of control in relation to his healing, but also there's the recognition that there is a power present in the world greater than his might. After he's cleansed in the Jordan, he declares, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel...” Naaman discovers that the God of Israel can do things he can't, despite his earthly power and notoriety. Though he is a mighty warrior, he comes to see who's the real mighty one in the world. He comes to see that God is more powerful than he is and that only God can heal.

And though it may be tough to handle because the truth can be tough to hear at times, Naaman learns that his might can't stop God from healing him in any way God chooses. His might and even financial currency can't make God heal him either. There are some things you can't save or heal, like yourself. Naaman was equipped with his horses and chariots and some trust in them but this story calls us to trust in God. Even the mighty have to humbly turn to God as they return to their humble beginnings—dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Life shocks us sometimes and the real shock after all may be that Naaman is not even a follower of Yahweh when he's healed. His healing is the impetus to conversion, the reorientation of his life by turning to God. As one commentator writes, “His healing was a free gift. Faith was not a precondition for health; health was given in order to create faith” (Richard Nelson). This firmly stands in the face of preachers who stress faith as a means to healing. God heals how and when and who God chooses. This may be the real shock to our well-manicured theological systems.

Naaman's story may be our story. Yes, baptism reflects a new life in God. But beyond this, there's so much more here. Somehow we may find ourselves in a place of suffering today, needing to learn how to handle our own suffering before God.

What do you do when you suffer? Naaman embraced his suffering as part of the journey and his suffering didn't prevent him from being a great man and doing great things. But eventually he listened to a community of people for advice and guidance. He leaned on communal wisdom and didn't go through his suffering all by himself. And through this communal wisdom and input, he heard that there's healing for suffering but he learns that he can't heal himself. He needed God to meet him in the Jordan. It wasn't his ideal path but he had to trust God's way as the means to healing. Then he had to act on the directions he received. He had to do something, not just sit there, and wash in the Jordan seven times. He had to participate in his own healing through action.

He was a mighty warrior and he suffered from leprosy. He was a mighty warrior and he turned to God. And you are mighty in your way, but what will you do?