

“BREAK OUT THE EPSON SALTS”

2 Kings 5:1-14

July 6, 2025

So you're on the beach on a hot balmy day. The sand is burning your feet; the ocean waves are rolling in just like the sweat is rolling off your body. And you're lugging your beach chair, boogie boards, umbrella, a cooler, the kid toys, and the family across the Sahara. Well, it seems like it anyway. You get close enough to feel the refreshing ocean breeze offering some relief. What do you do? Are you ready to take the plunge? Do you make a bee line to the shore and run head long into the crashing waves because you just can't wait to feel the rush of the cool waters and float in the ocean waves. **OR**

Are you one of those people that enter the waters slowly? You approach the waters watching the rolling waves and contemplating an entry point. You first dip a toe in the surf, letting the waves wash over your feet and sink into the sand. After a few moments you slowly step into the waves, feet, ankles, shins, knees, waist, feeling your way as you go. Finally, when you're comfortable you submerge under the water. You want to get used to the water and ease into the experience.

I can't help but wonder if these two approaches to the ocean describe our spiritual experiences. Some, when they hear the call of Christ, see God at work around them, or are moved by the Spirit want to jump head long into the experience of faith. Others, well we are a little more cautious. We want time to figure things out, test the spirits, be more discerning, and think through the implications of our faith.

I'm not saying one is necessarily better than the other, depending on the situation. I believe there are times God calls us to step in the batter box and swing

away. There are other times we are called to just put one foot in front of the other and move at a slow pace until God reveals God's plans to us.

In our scripture passage this morning, we find a man who is slow to take the plunge, at least when it comes to faith. He is general of the army of Aram, a northeastern kingdom in relationship to Israel. He has the king's ear, is a mighty warrior, and is rich. Just look at the treasure he brings on his road trip to Israel. A single talent was 75-100 pounds of precious metal; it was worth 20 years of wages to a day laborer. And this man is carrying with him 10 talents of silver. A 1 percenter for sure! In his possession is a personal letter from the king. This guy has clout!

What's captivating, is the scriptures say, **“by him the Lord had given victory to Aram”** meaning God was working in the man's life. Understand, Aram was an enemy of Israel and God is favoring at least this general and blessing him with success. In other words, God is bigger than any one nation, which we often seem to forget.

And yet, for all Naaman's power, prestige, wealth, and success he is afflicted with **a skin disease**. It was probably some form of psoriasis. But it must have been bad, irritating, itchy, and embarrassing, so much so, that he is willing to listen to a **lowly slave girl** and risk traveling through the country of his enemy. Actually, he is asking them for help. Yet, when that help is offered Naaman is slow to take the plunge, both spiritually and literally. Why?

I. WHERE IS OUR HELP FOUND?

Mary Townsend, in **“What I Am Looking for in Empty Churches”** wrote, “My favorite thing to do is find an empty church and sit. Since I'm a single mother of two, it's not hard to see why I'd be looking for a little peace and quiet.

But there's more to it than that, and it's not always easy to explain. I'm after a certain kind of silence. ...

I first went into these churches, determined in a sense of rebellion. I was a teen atheist in Catholic high school, and I joined the **church choir out of sheer boredom**. Now I go to church for real: once a week in the usual way but still more often alone. At these times, I go insistent on the "not." I bring no opinions, nothing certain, just me and the arc of the ceiling. And I go with a promise to myself: The moment it feels fake, I'm out the door.

A church is, after all, most concretely a building: a place built to collect desire and to give a shape to hope. It is the precise architecture for what we humanly want, when no human being can fully know what it may be or what will happen next. *And when I'm sitting there, with nothing to do and no one saying a word, something does happen to me. ... To me, at least, that's worth the adventure of trying the door."*

Mary is describing her need for God and how she encounters God in the silence. I highly suspect God was working in Naaman's life and he was not aware of it. He knows his need, but he has not come to the revelation of his need for God. Naaman is looking for help, perhaps even a miracle but he is not looking for religion or the Lord.

Just look at how he approaches his skin problem. Naaman hears about a prophet in Israel and immediately comes up with an action plan. He goes to the King of Aram, receives a letter of recommendation, takes payment because you know miracles aren't free, travels south to get an audience with the powers that be, namely the king of Israel. Naaman is attempting to control the situation and orchestrate his healing process. He is used to power and issuing commands. He has yet to learn that no one commands God.

The irony is all of Naaman's plans, power and riches are useless. The king of Israel is portrayed as a comical buffoon, 2 Kings commentary on the powers that be. He reads Naaman's letter of recommendation asking for healing, tears his clothes apart in anguish, and accuses the king of Aram of trying to pick a fight. **"Am I God"**, obviously, the faith of the king is small. Help was not going to be found through politics, it rarely is. It was not found in doctors of the court. Help would be found in God alone.

When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, **"Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."** It is not really learning about a prophet, but rather about the God who works through the prophet.

II. THE HEROES OF THE STORY

Naaman and his whole entourage arrive at Elisha's door. He is likely expecting a grand **welcome** as befits a man of his position. He expects a **religious spectacle** — a dramatic display of the prophet's power. He expects some kind of difficult task or costly payment on his part. Just look at our medical bills! Instead, the prophet is a "no show". Elisha sends out the **UPS man** to deliver a simple instruction: **"Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."**

Naaman feels insulted and enraged. This is not how you treat an honored guest. I imagine if he wasn't in enemy territory, he would have broken the door down and done harm to the Elisha. Instead he makes a racial slur about the unimpressive Jordan River and turns to go home. What a colossal waste of time!

Step 7 of the famous **"Twelve Steps" of Alcoholics Anonymous** is: **"Humbly asked [God] to remove our shortcomings."** This is the step in the

healing process that gives Naaman the greatest difficulty. The required dip in the muddy waters of the Jordan requires this eminent personage to admit he has shortcomings. That's what sticks in his craw. Naaman is blinded by his greatness, success, and high station. He is used to giving the orders not receiving orders. His pride is tripping him up. Life was not all about Naaman, just like it is not all about us. He had to humble himself in order to be healed.

Thank goodness for the servants. They are the real heroes of the story. They are used to obeying orders, even the simplest. I imagine they approached Naaman in trepidation and said, **“Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”** Only this timely and wise intervention persuaded him that it would be foolish not to give it a try, since he had already made the journey.

It's helpful to remember that God often works in unexpected ways. God often works through ordinary means, does he not? Small acts of obedience, everyday relationships and seemingly insignificant moments. When seeking healing, humbling ourselves in the presence of healing power is not an option. It's part of the cure.

Do we have any rivers in which God is asking us to dip? Naaman's story invites us to ask, **“What is the ‘Jordan River’ in our own lives?”** Is there something God is asking you to do that seems too simple, too humbling or too insignificant? Perhaps it's forgiving someone, serving in an unglamorous role or trusting God in an area where you feel vulnerable. May we embrace obedience and humility, and trust in the inscrutable ways of God, even when they defy our expectations.

Richard Rohr in his blog “**Authentic and Humble Fire**,” wrote, “All the truly great persons I have ever met are characterized by what I would call “**radical humility**.” They are deeply convinced that they are drawing from another source; they are instruments. Their genius is not their own; it is borrowed. They understand that we are moons, not suns, except in our ability to pass on the light. Our life is not our own, yet, at some level, enlightened people know their life has been given to them as a sacred trust. They live in gratitude and confidence, and they try to let the flow continue through them. They know that love is repaid by love alone...”

III. BABY SKIN

It has been a while since I held **a newborn baby in my arms**. But I find it amazing to touch their skin. It is so incredibly soft that it feels unnatural, especially compared to our tough, sundried, wrinkled, calloused, scarred, and blotchy flesh.

When Naaman finally relents, goes down to the Jordan River and dips in seven times the bible says, “**; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.**” Notice not only the healing of his skin condition, but now the condition of his skin. It is made new. God isn’t here to just fix our problems, but to change our lives.

Even more impressive than physical healing was his *spiritual* awakening. He declared, “**Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel**” The real miracle is his change of heart. Naaman’s attitude and orientation do a complete turnabout. He promises to live a different way. Naaman is still a general in the army, but with humility, obedience, worship of God.

Naaman’s journey to healing started when he humbled himself enough to listen to the servant girl and then obeyed Elisha’s simple command. Humility

and obedience are the twin channels through which God's grace flows into our lives.

Growing up in Northeastern Ohio, my aunt and uncle had a backyard swimming pool. This was not one of those smoothly lined pools we have today. No sir. This pool was more like a glorified cement pond, painted blue. The bottom was rough and would scrape my feet. But even worse, the pool was surrounded by trees, and it had no heater. I swear that water never got above 60 degrees.

There was no casual way of getting in the pool. All I could do was brace myself and take the plunge. After that, just keep swimming. Somehow my body adjusted, and I survived the cold waters.

If we are waiting for everything in life to be comfortable and all the stars to align, we will never step out in faith. Sometimes we simply need trust God, hold our breath, and take the plunge. When we do, we will discover that our liberation, our healing, our spiritual growth, and our actions are intimately connected and can never be separated. Richard Rohr, **"Some people set out to act first, and an inner experience may be given to them on the journey itself. Others have an inner experience that then leads them into action. It doesn't matter on which side it begins. Eventually action and spirituality must meet and feed one another. When prayer is authentic, it will always lead to actions of mercy; when actions of mercy are attempted at any depth, they will always lead us to prayer."**

May the God of all grace, bring healing power to your lives and to lives of all those around us that we might be made fresh and new this very day. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, July 6, 2025

Second Scripture Lesson

2 Kings 5:1-14

¹Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper.

²And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife.

³And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy.

⁴And one went in, and told his lord, saying, Thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel.

⁵And the king of Syria said, Go to, go, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel. And he departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment.

⁶And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, Now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have therewith sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy.

⁷And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me.

⁸And it was so, when Elisha the man of God had heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.

⁹So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha.

¹⁰And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.

¹¹But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of

the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.

¹³And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?

¹⁴Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.