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Peace, Seattle
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2 Kings 5:1-14[1]

STARTING FROM BELOW

By every measure he came out on top:

- He was a leader esteemed by his peers and revered by those who served under him.
- A warrior whose acumen on the battlefield provoked fear in his enemies,
- A commander of distinction whose unswerving loyalty had earned him the trust of his king.

But in spite of all the accolades, there was one weakness he could not hide: Naaman was afflicted with leprosy. And this undeniable fact—this disease over which he had no control—threatened to define his life.

Leprosy and other skin maladies, in ancient as well as modern times, have long stuck fear in the hearts of those who've contracted them, and their families.

A colleague who once served on the Hawaiian island of Molokai once shared with me the history of the community of Kalaupapa, which for a century served as a colony for people with leprosy—or Hansen's disease as we now call it.

Despite the advent of new and effective treatments, he said, social prejudices continued to prevail.[2] During his tenure at Kalaupapa, church groups who came to the island to work on service projects invariably left something behind when they departed: In the dorm where they stayed he'd find a garbage sack. Its contents? All the clothing they'd used while they were on the island.

In spite of the fact that over 95% of exposures result in no disease,[3] and infections are readily treatable, fear and ignorance about Hanson's disease, about leprosy, continues.

Turn back the clock to this story from 2 Kings, and you can multiply the fear and ignorance by a factor of ten.

But just after Naaman is introduced and his affliction named, a nameless character enters the story, someone who will turn this tale in a whole new direction.

Did you notice her? She's there in verses 2-3 of our reading—the young Israeli girl taken captive during a raid and brought back by Naaman to serve his wife.

It is she, one of God's little ones, who becomes the unlikely catalyst in the story of healing that will unfold.

"Your husband may be strong," she tells her mistress boldly, "but I know of one who's stronger still. Someone who could make his leprosy and the shame that goes with it, disappear."

[1] Sermon on same text was preached on February 12, 2012.
[2] From: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalaupapa_Leprosy_Settlement_and_National_Historical_Park - Establishment_of_leper_colony You can visit the National Park Service website at: http://www.nps.gov/kala/historyculture/index.htm
[3] From online article: http://www.medicinenet.com/leprosy/page5.htm

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Her mistress takes these words to heart, shares them with her husband, Naaman, and he in turn tells it to the king… whereupon the king, familiar with the ways of men, but not with the ways of Israel's God, puts together a plan to PURCHASE the healing Naaman so desperately desires.

And before you know it, Naaman is heading south with horse and chariot and retinue; flush with gifts and cash and a letter from his king.

But something has been lost in translation!

For you see, the King of Aram assumes it is his counterpart—the King of Israel—who calls the shots when it comes to the prophets of his land…isn't that the way it's supposed to work? But after reading the letter, Israel's King is at a loss for what to do; he can only interpret the unexpected request for healing as some sort of trap.

Enter now Elisha, who, on hearing of his king's dismay, says:

LET NAAMAN COME TO ME, THAT HE MAY LEARN THAT THERE IS A PROPHET IN ISRAEL.

And so Naaman comes.

Now Naaman is a man of discipline. The kind of guy of whom St. Paul speaks when he says, "THEY EXERCISE SELF-CONTROL IN ALL THINGS." (1 Cor 9:25)

And when he finally arrives at Elisha's house, he comes with expectations about what his supposed path to healing ought to look like.

- **The prophet will come out a greet me and I'll plunk down my cash and gifts.**
- **When he sees my stature and what HE will be getting out of the deal, he'll perform a healing ritual—full of gestures and incantations;**
- **and I'll be cured and back on my way home in no time; back to the rest of my life.**

SURELY, Naaman thought, I DESERVE THAT MUCH.

But much to his chagrin, Naaman discovers that the road to his healing will not conform to his expectations in the least.

For the people of Kalaupapa, healing was measured in generations. And yet, thanks to the spirit of community that grew there through the ministry of servants like Father Damien, Brother Dutton, and the congregational church, healing of another sort—the healing that comes with knowing you are loved and have a place in a loving and caring community—this kind of healing could take place even when being cured of the disease proved elusive.

Elisha, our story tells us, doesn't even set foot outside his house to greet Naaman when he arrives. Instead he sends a messenger.

TELL HIM TO WASH IN THE JORDAN SEVEN TIMES, Elisha instructs,
AND HIS FLESH WILL BE RESTORED, AND HE WILL BE CLEAN.

Hearing this news—and from a delivery boy rather than the prophet himself—is too much for Naaman.

And if it wasn't for the intercession of a few more nameless servants, (notice how they keep popping up, these little ones of God?) he would have stalked off in a rage and that would have been the end of it. **But Naaman, to his credit, listens to his servants.** And leaning on their faith, he moves beyond his rage, beyond his pride, to a place of submission. And going down to the Jordan, he immerses

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himself seven times, as instructed, and his flesh is restored "like the flesh of a young boy, and he is clean."

How long did all this take? I rather imagine those seven baths took place one day at a time. Seven, after all, is the Biblical number for completion and wholeness. Seven days.

And by the time he's done the healing is much more than skin deep.

So profoundly is Naaman affected, that when he returns to thank Elisha, he offered this confession:
NOW I KNOW THAT THERE IS NO GOD IN ALL THE EARTH EXCEPT IN ISRAEL!

Reading beyond where our lesson ends, we learn that Naaman begs Elisha to accept a gift for his services, but Elisha refuses. That kind of wealth has no place in his world. And when Naaman finally turns toward home, he takes with him two mule loads of earth from the soil of Israel, so this place, and his experience of healing, might remain with him always.

None of this would have happened had the young Israeli girl not raised her voice to her mistress. None of this would have happened had Naaman's servants not talked him off the edge.

It's not the HEADLINES and the HEADLINERS who drive this STORY. It's the nearly invisible ones, working below the radar, who are the catalysts here. And who, with Elisha, are most in tune with God's purposes.

Often enough, that's how God seems to get things going in this world—not by way of the official version of history but through the sub-version.

We pay far too much attention to the headline-grabbing speeches and tweets of those in high position rather than to those on the ground and in the trenches who know the true costs of ill-conceived pronunciations and policies from on high.

Instead of being seduced by bluff and bluster and political grandstanding, this story invites us to look under the radar for where seeds of transformation are being planted…and then, it invites us to become messengers of that transformation, testifying that the kingdom—the reign—of God has come near.

Let us pray:
Saving God, in your time, by your grace, you work in each of our lives to bring about redemption, healing, and wholeness. Give us eyes to see the seeds of transformation you are planting among us, and mouths to proclaim a message of hope, trusting that, no matter what circumstances we face, you will remain faithful and true, our companion, our Savior, our Lord. Amen.