



**“Healing Communities”**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany  
February 15, 2009  
2 Kings 5:1-14 (NRSV)***

**ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE**

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The Old Testament reading and primary text for today’s sermon is from one of Ancient Israel’s history books, II Kings, chapter 5, verses 1-14, “the healing of Naaman.” Naaman was a famous commander of the Syrian army and an enemy of Ancient Israel.

According to Israel’s historians, Naaman was healed by the prophet Elisha as the result of a referral from his wife’s slave girl, whom Naaman had captured during his defeat of Israel.

The medicine that Elisha prescribed was not some high-powered drug, or state-of-the-art surgery, but a simple protocol that most anyone could have prescribed or taken — washing in the Jordan River.

The healing also seems to have resulted from Naaman’s willingness to humble himself and accept the ministry of his enemies.

This healing account is remarkable in many ways. For one, it is the only account of Naaman in the Bible other than a brief reference to this story which is found in Luke 4:27. The story is also unique in that it is a rare account of a disreputable character taking unlikely action and receiving a seemingly undeserved blessing through the intervention of Israelite intermediaries and their God.

So, the healing of Naaman is not your garden-variety healing narrative; Naaman is not your garden variety biblical protagonist; and the behavior that he and his intermediaries exhibited is not what ancient or modern audiences would have expected.

In the end, these surprising characters and their remarkable behavior offer insight and inspiration for those in every generation who seek healing and hope in the face of personal and communal disease.

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for the reading and receiving of this ancient message by singing together verse 2 of "Open My Eyes."

**MUSICAL MEDITATION** "Open My Eyes, That I May See" (v. 2)<sup>1</sup>

Scott

*O-pen my ears, that I may hear voic-es of truth thou  
Send-est clear; and while the wave-notes fall on my ear,  
Ev-ery-thing false will dis-ap-pear.  
Si-lent-ly now I wait for thee, read-y, my God, thy will to see.  
O-pen my ears, il-lumine me, Spir-it di-vine!*

**SCRIPTURE READING**

Susan MacDonald

### **2 Kings 5:1-14 "The Healing of Naaman"**

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram [modern Syria], was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six-thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But 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."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he 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?" He turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants approached and said to him, "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'?"

So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

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<sup>1</sup> Text and Tune: Clara H. Scott. Public domain.

The healing of Naaman is a fascinating story. What intrigues me most about it as a pastor, and as someone who has served in health and human services in the national setting of the United Church of Christ, is that the healing of Naaman illustrates the role of faith — and the relationships between individuals and groups — in the healing process.

On a global level, this story is an invitation to heads of state to seek peace and harmony by following the example of a commander who recognized his own needs, laid down his military weapons, and presented himself to his enemies with an open hand. So, on a global level the healing of Naaman illustrates that the first moves toward global peace and harmony are grounded in spiritual dispositions and acts of humility, vulnerability, and risk.

If the healing of Naaman were to unfold in our time, it would be as if Maher al-Assad, the head of the Syrian Presidential Guard, were sent by President Bashar al-Assad, for medical treatment in Jerusalem on Ehud Olmert’s watch, or if Fidel Castro were to have pursued and been permitted medical treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital while George W. Bush was President.

The healing of Naaman is an extraordinary story — the kind that one may only associate with fantasy or fiction — except that this story is true. According to Israel’s historians, Naaman really did have leprosy, he really did go to Israel for help, and he really was cured.

There are no medical charts, diagnostic test results, or detailed description of the prophet’s protocol used for the cure. There is simply this memory etched in the history of the kings that describes how Naaman’s wife’s slave girl referred the commander to a doctor in her homeland, and how he followed her advice, garnered royal support to seek aid, and then traveled to Israel, took the prophet’s cure, and was healed of his disease.

### III

Leprosy, or Hansen’s disease, as you may know, was a common ailment in biblical times. It was a medical condition that modern doctors would now call a “garbage pail” diagnosis in that it was a diagnosis used for any skin disease that produced lesions and infection in patients.<sup>2</sup>

Today leprosy is known as a disease caused by a specific bacterium, which is preventable with the use of clean water and antiseptics, and which is treatable with antibiotics. But in biblical times — and even today in many countries — the basic necessities of life, such as clean water and basic health care, are unavailable or a luxury that most cannot afford.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy>

In biblical times, people who exhibited severe cases of leprosy were banished to the edges of their villages and made to live in leper colonies, and they were shut out of the Temple and excluded from the worship life of their community. Thus, lepers lost most if not all contact with their families and friends, and they lost their ability to work and earn money, so that they were quickly reduced to begging for food, shelter, and clothing.

These proto-quarantine practices of biblical times were primarily motivated by religious beliefs that the sick and diseased were unclean, and therefore unfit to enter the religious sanctuaries or to participate in the religious ceremonies. Though leprosy lost some of its religious stigma over the centuries, these quarantine practices continued to be a normative part of treating leprosy into modern times.

The interchanges between Jesus and various lepers in the gospels suggest that he ministered largely to people with more severe cases than Naaman (whose disease had not yet become so serious as to warrant his ostracism from the community). Part of the miraculous healing that Jesus performed was not just relief from the physical effects of disease, but the healing that occurred in the communities with which lepers were associated. Jesus' healing of lepers included their reunification with their families and friends, reconnection with their religious community and practices, and the ability to return to meaningful and profitable work.

Though Naaman didn't seem to suffer the ostracism that we associate with the lepers whom Jesus healed, the threat of the disease's progression and ostracism from the community must have been palpable for the commander. He was, after all, a man of the world, and he had seen how such diseases had progressed in others. Perhaps it was this knowledge that inspired his search for a cure.

#### IV

The nature of leprosy and its psycho-social and spiritual dimensions are both troubling and important to understanding the effects of this disease on the individuals, families, and communities that are stricken by it.

Another interesting factor about leprosy — and about how Elisha treats Naaman in this story — is that the prophet didn't prescribe some high-powered drug, or state-of-the-art medical procedure — even by ancient standards. Instead, Elisha offered a very simple protocol — “Go wash seven times in the Jordan River.”

When Naaman received his prescription from Elisha's underling, the commander was disappointed that he did not receive a more elaborate treatment. Perhaps his expectations had been set high because he had come seeking treatment from the world-famous physician Elisha, or perhaps the commander felt that he himself was a big-name foreign patient, who merited a more exotic or elaborate treatment. In any event, Naaman did not get what he expected. He got what he needed.

Perhaps we are not so different from Naaman. Our experience of western medicine has taught many of us to expect that the answer to what ails us is a new pill or state-of-the-art surgery or therapy, rather than a remedy that we might be able to administer at home or in our communities without a lot of fancy protocols or big expense.

I am reminded, for example, by public health efforts such as “Healthy People 2010,” that something in the range of 85% of all illness and disease in the US is preventable through immunizations, proper diet and exercise, and through the avoidance or cessation of smoking, illicit drug and alcohol abuse, and unsafe sex practices.

Because good health is grounded in healthy physical, mental, and spiritual behaviors, religious communities can (and often do) play a key role in the health of our members and the larger society — even in our high-tech, high-dollar medical environment.

I am reminded, for example, of what a huge difference some progressive churches have made in the lives of persons living with AIDS in the past twenty-five years. In the 1980s when the first instances of this disease showed up in the United States, doctors were unsure of what they were dealing with. Research, treatment, and prevention education were delayed not only because of the complexity of the disease but because of the correlation of the disease with minority populations such as: gay men, IV drug users, persons of color, refugees, the desperately poor, and other disenfranchised groups.

Church groups, including leaders in the United Church of Christ and some of our local churches, were among the first to respond with compassion for persons affected by HIV/AIDS, and to mount public policy campaigns to support funding for research, health services, and prevention education.

Back in the late 1980s, when I was first starting out in ministry, the congregation that I served in Boston, The Old South Church, and others started prayer, advocacy, and direct service groups to minister with persons with HIV/AIDS. Most of the people with whom I ministered in those days died before I ever left Boston, but I will never forget them, nor will I forget how important they found the church’s ministry in their dying days.

More than one person said to me things like this: “I have a doctor, a nurse, a nutritionist, a psychotherapist, a social worker, a patient advocate, and friends. But only this church prays for me. Only this church tells me that God loves me, and that my purpose in life is something greater than this suffering that I now endure. Only this church helps me make sense of living and my dying.”

Because of the advocacy and education work that many of our progressive churches have done along with numerous public health and secular nonprofit organizations, the stigma of HIV/AIDS and the treatment and prevention of the disease have been somewhat ameliorated in recent years. Still the need for education, prevention, and pastoral care continues until HIV/AIDS is eradicated, and the role of the church continues to be as salient as ever — because of the religious taboos that are associated with it in many traditions.

So HIV/AIDS education, advocacy, and ministry are a crucial way that our UCC congregations have been engaged in the healing ministry of our Judeo-Christian tradition. Some other examples follow:

- Two years ago, Eden Church adopted a **Safe Congregation Policy and Procedure**, which articulates our shared commitment to providing for the safety of members and friends who participate in the life and ministry of Eden Church. A group of front-liners, chaired by Pam Winthers, is currently working on an update to this policy based on lived experience and advice and counsel from our consultant, the Rev. Dr. Kibbie Ruth, Executive Director of Kyros Ministries, Inc.<sup>3</sup>
- Our church has trained every employee and willing volunteer in **First-Aid, CPR, disaster response**, and in **the prevention of sexual and domestic violence** and in the reporting procedures for suspected abuse. To date, approximately 45 youth and adults have been trained in these procedures. (See Liz McKay or me to let us know of your willingness to participate in future trainings.)
- Eden Church keeps up-to-date **health records** on our members and friends, so that if one among us does experience a medical emergency while participating in a church event we have a quick way of updating the EMTs on a patient's medications, conditions, physicians, and healthcare plan, and we know who to contact to support a patient if there is a need to transport for further care. (In the six years that I've been at Eden, we have called 9-1-1 seven times and the EMTs have transported patients each time. Having this information readily at hand has helped ensure prompt and appropriate treatment.)
- **Other ways** that we support each other in healthy lifestyles include regular phone calls to check up on each other, and sending greeting cards to support and encourage each other in the midst of physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges. We also make hospital and house calls on each other. We invite each other to exercise together — maybe even to join the “Walk-able Neighborhoods” program which promotes healthier, safer neighborhoods. And we worship and pray together on Sundays, and through organized prayer practices like our monthly prayer group led by Mary Haro, the weekly Yoga program led by Amanda Sharpe, and scheduled and randomly planned walks on the labyrinth, led by Brenda Loreman.
- Through our participation in Congregations Organizing for Renewal (COR), which has advocated for healthcare for all, and through our support of Tiburcio Vasquez Health Centers, we have also helped promote better health for our wider community.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kyros.org/>

Through these and other offerings of our church, which promote better health and healthier lifestyles, we affirm our care and concern for one another, and we become a healing community for ourselves and for all whose lives are touched by our shared ministry.

The nature of our relationships likely differs from the relationships that Naaman had with those around him, but our relationships with each other are no less significant. Like Naaman, we are part of a web of healing relationships in this congregation and community, and we often play interchangeable roles.

Sometimes we play the part of health educators, the spiritual and emotional support systems, and even the health referral systems for each other — much like Naaman's wife and her maid, Naaman's soldiers, the kings, and the prophet Elisha. Sometimes, we also play the part of Naaman in that we are the person in need of healing and wholeness.

Most often, I suspect, we play both roles. We are people in need of healing and people who are able to promote the wellbeing of others. Our own experiences of suffering, no doubt, have given us empathy and insights into the needs of others, and they have hopefully taught us the importance of not only giving, but also receiving the care of this community and of the Holy Spirit.

The need to recognize and affirm our interconnections and to be part of an intentional, healing community is integral to what it means to be people of faith. Caring about our own and each other's physical, emotional, and spiritual health, and the health of our wider community, are also ways that we follow Christ's example, and become the healing community that he called us to be.

My prayer for us today and always is that we may open ourselves to God's healing presence in our lives, and become the agents of healing and hope that Christ has called us to be. Amen.