

Naaman

You have to love the story about Naaman.

Here he is, this fancy schmancy high falootin' general who has a terrible case of psoriasis, which is playing havoc with his online dating life.

That is, until some slave girl from a nowhere-ville country tells him about a fellow who might be able to fix him.

After some cajoling from his subordinates, Naaman reluctantly makes his way to the prophet Elisha only to get even more upset because Elisha doesn't come out with a red carpet, or get down on his hands and knees thanking the general for the great honor of his presence, or whipping out the tea and caviar for this pompous guest.

Instead, Elisha, sitting on his Barcalounger, watching *The Young And The Restless*, yells out (during a commercial break) for the general to go take a bath in the river Jordan.

And because Elisha knows that this general is all about drama and hoopla, for good measure, Elisha tells him to dunk himself in that river seven times.

The general is furious and refuses because, if you can't get the red carpet, at least you can get some smoke and mirrors!

Some abracadabra and Kalamazoo (which is a town in Michigan, but that's another story).

Until, once again, his underlings stroke his tender ego, Naaman does as he's told, and lo and behold, his skin is as clear as a baby's behind.

Why does this story matter?

What might this story say about us and how we approach matters of faith?

Perhaps it's this.

So much of religious faith is all about outside stuff.

Like speaking in tongues or handling snakes, or blowing incense all over the place.

Like these fancy clothes that your clergy wear.

Or long prayers said on calloused knees.

Or creeds and doctrines.

And let's not forget all of the holy wars fought between those who have "the one true faith," and everyone else ... who doesn't.

We begin with the story of Naaman, because his story sheds a lot of light on the story of Jesus.

Who Jesus is.

Who Jesus calls us to become.

As you know, this year, we spend the whole year with the gospel of Luke.

Luke, as you also probably know, is the most radical of all four gospel writers when it comes to how Jesus impacts the world that we live in.

Luke starts his story by giving us God in the flesh – through the womb of a young teenager.

A teen from a no account town who gets pregnant out of wedlock.

And when the time comes for her to give birth, who's the first to hear this earth-shattering news?

Why, the ancient world's equivalent of the Hells Angels motorcycle gang!

Shepherds!

Fast forward a few decades when Luke sits us down with Jesus beginning his public ministry in his hometown.

By opening the book of the prophet Isaiah, and announcing that he's come to set captives free!

To give new eyes to the blind!

New ears to the deaf!

New legs to the lame!

Which his town people applaud, until Jesus gets to the punchline.

And what's the punchline?

It's the story of Naaman!

The pagan general who gets healed when so many of Israel's best and brightest are not.

The significance of all that?

It's this.

It's the pivot point between our faith and "the world."

"The world," in Bible-speak, means the status quo.

The way things are.

What passes for common sense.

And it's at that pivot point where our faith, and the world, collide.

Because, let's be honest, we like to earn our salvation.

We like to decide who's in and who's out.

We like to think that when we die and go to heaven, we'll have a box seat overlooking hell, watching those who didn't measure up suffer for eternity.

But none of that is what Jesus is about.

Instead, Jesus is here to eliminate "us against them."

Jesus is here to destroy any sense that one person is intrinsically better than another.

And in fact, he's here to bring the whole world home.

As in: "When I am lifted up, I'll drag the whole world to myself." Jn. 12:32.

Yes, even Putin.

Even Trump.

Even Hitler.

Which is why Luke's gospel is so incredibly radical.

Because Luke keeps highlighting the outsiders that make their way into Jesus's inner circle.

Like the Samaritan today, who is among the 10 who are cured.

Who becomes the only one to walk away with Jesus's blessing.

When we think of Samaritans today, we think of the Good Samaritan.

They're like our best friend or that helpful, next-door neighbor.

But to the Jewish people in Jesus's day, the Samaritans were like the Taliban.

They were absolute heretics, whose ancestors desecrated the Jewish temple, by throwing human bones into the holy of holies.

These are not people to associate with, much less hold up as role models to be emulated.

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus challenges the religiously proper by constantly pointing out, by constantly lifting up, those who are despised.

"It is these," Jesus says, "through whom God's eyes shine upon the earth."

Thus, Luke's beatitudes, unlike Matthew's, are not only a series of blessings, but Luke includes a whole litany of woes against those who think they've got it all together.

So the Jesus whom Luke knows is a Jesus who's constantly urging us to open our eyes (and arms and hearts) to the wider world.

Especially to the stranger.

To the immigrant.

To those who are different.

Something that today's world needs to learn all over again.

Because, isn't that the chicken that's coming home to roost in our society today?

As state governments, using the guise of Christianity, engage in practical warfare against those who are minorities.

The odd.

The vulnerable.

People of different sexual orientations are again being ostracized, belittled, shunted aside.

History lessons that we desperately need to learn: about racism, sexism, bigotry and fear, are being whitewashed.

Shamelessly excluded from public libraries and school curriculum.

All the while, military budgets and tax breaks for the insanely wealthy are treated like untouchable sacred cows, while poor families whose livelihoods were helped with \$300 a month in childcare credits have seen those benefits stripped away.

If we're going to claim Christ, then we have to recognize the collision course that we are on with "the world."

With the way things are.

With so-called "common sense."

We need to get to a place where we can begin to once again understand that God is found among the lowly, the outsider, the forgotten.

If we wish to meet Jesus, that is where we shall find him.

It's a lesson that Naaman learns as he humbly returns to Elisha's home.

Recognizing at long last that he's not cured by Elisha's magic, but by the grace of Elisha's God.

Which begs the question.

Will we too recognize Elisha's God?

Will we recognize Naaman's God?

Will we see the truth that Jesus gave his very life to deliver to us?

The truth that says:

"Come to me blessed of my father, for when I was hungry, you fed me.

When I was naked, you clothed me.

When I was in prison, you visited me."

Might we, like St Francis, pray for the grace to embrace this radically amazing life?

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

+amen.