“***Cleansing or Saving?***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Oct. 13, 2019

**2 Kings 5:1–3, 8–14**

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor. . . . Though a mighty warrior, he suffered from leprosy. 2Now the Arameans had a young girl captive from the land of Israel who served Naaman’s wife. 3She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy”. . . .

8 Then Elisha sent a message . . . . “Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” 9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” 11But 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. . . . 12Are 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. 13But 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’?” 14So 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.

**Luke 17:11–19**

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” 14When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” 19Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you.” *[“saved”–NAB]*

The main message of the gospel passage today is about gratitude. I’ll come back to that. I want to look at the 2 Kings passage, where there are a lot of ingredients to the story, and several good messages.

Naaman is the Syrian general, powerful and proud, with a retinue of servants, but he has become aware that his disease is so bad that he desperately needs to be cured. That is the first thing to notice, that Naaman has become aware of his great need. Open to new ideas, he listens to his wife, who has been listening to her Hebrew servant, who tells her of a healing prophet in Israel. The Hebrew servant has an effect on someone without talking to him. That can happen with us, too. Our words and our spirit ripple outward to others, and can have a great effect.

Naaman goes to Israel, and gets instructions from the prophet Elisha, but immediately he gets frustrated. First, he doesn’t like the fact that Elisha just sends instructions by messenger. Naaman remarks, “I thought that for me he would surely come out” (2 Kgs 5:11). In other words, why didn’t the prophet come out *in person*, “for me”? This shows that Naaman is proud and self-centered. He is not used to being needy. He doesn’t know how to do it. He *certainly* does not know how to beg for help!

Then he objects to being asked to bathe in the Jordan. Aren’t Damascus’ rivers greater than *this* country’s little one? This shows us Naaman’s nationalistic pride. So Naaman is allowing his pride to get in the way, even though such pride could probably have been expected. Have you ever acted in a similar way?

Naaman’s third objection is the most interesting, though also the most obscure. He is irritated that the healing instructions are not more difficult or complicated. It’s too simple, to just dunk himself in the river. The servants tell Naaman he would surely have followed the instructions if they were difficult (v. 13). This implies that Naaman expected a more complicated procedure. So it’s a *ritual* concern, a religious objection, maybe even a superstitious one. He thinks that something as serious as healing from leprosy must require a more difficult ritual.

Even today, many Christians hold assumptions like this. They assume that powerful solutions require elaborate rituals, and also that difficult or prolonged rituals will surely lead to good results. They may think that if they pray for hours on their knees until they’re in great pain, their prayer will be more effective. If they *suffer* more, they will compel God to *give* them more. This is an old and materialistic way of thinking, the notion that God is persuaded or induced by ritual or by difficulty. But you don’t *impress* God with complex rituals, you don’t *persuade* God by suffering, you don’t bargain or *deal* with God. There is no transaction. There is no way to manipulate or persuade God. When Naaman finally just dunks himself in the Jordan, as he was told, he is healed.

God is willing to heal even a grumpy and proud foreign general, but the guy must be willing to act, as the text says, “according to the word of the man of God” (5:14). The message seems to be that we should trust a true prophet, which is the same as trusting God. When God is going to heal someone, God does not require that the person be Israelite, or that he be likeable or popular or charming, or go through prolonged rituals, only that he put his full faith in God.

That brings us back to the New Testament story. Jesus also gives a very simple instruction, just “go and show yourselves to the priests” (17:14), and the lepers are healed as they walk—but only one, the foreigner, stops and thinks, and goes back, praising God. When he reaches Jesus he throws himself down on the ground and gives thanks. But what Jesus pays attention to is that the fellow is praising God, and he also points out that the only one who is praising God is the one foreigner. There is a sad irony in that. The others, presumably, are Galilean Jews, but none of them came back to give thanks and praise. They were brought up with the Torah, and *should* have recognized an act of divine kindness, but they just took it and ran.

Now, in both of these stories, healing is parallel with salvation. The final verse, in the NRSV, has Jesus saying “your faith has made you well.” They are using a secondary meaning of the word *sesoken*, but I prefer that we stick with its *main* meaning, which is “has *saved*.” What Jesus says to the Samaritan is “your faith has *saved* you.” Probably faith saved Naaman, too, in the first story, after he was persuaded by the servants to *have* a little faith in the man of God. The general and the Samaritan both have soul growth; theyreally *learn* something; both end up acknowledging an Israelite prophet.

There’s also a message about humility in both these texts. Think back to the first story. Who is it that believes in the prophet? A humble servant girl, and then her mistress, and they persuade the general to go to the Israelite prophet. Then, when Naaman won’t follow instructions, who is it who persuades him? Who sees the real value of following the prophet’s instructions? It is the humble servants (Hebrew *and* Syrian) who talk him into cooperating, which cures him. The servants have a great story to tell, afterward. And it is the humble Samaritan who returns to thank Jesus, and gets to hear that great line, “your faith has saved you.” Forever after he would re-tell the story of his healing, and what Jesus said to him afterward.

And there is a subtle anti-nationalist message in both stories. Nationalism can have some limited value, but in these stories it causes a problem. It makes Naaman resist the prophet’s instructions at first, and the Galileans’ nationalism causes them to miss out on a second phase to their encounter with Jesus, the teaching phase. “Your faith has saved you” is an important teaching, and being open to *receive* the teaching is an essential part of being saved. Salvation is more than just a physical healing. As Psalm 25:5 says, “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.”

And that holds for us, too. For us, as for characters in the Bible, salvation includes being ready to be taught, willing to be led by truth. Are you studying truth? Are you being spiritually changed? Are you being moved and affected inwardly? Salvation involves ongoing transformation. If you’re being led in the truth, you’re being led toward a spiritual destination. When we work with God, anything is possible. Let us be grateful for God’s healing effect in our minds and hearts.