

January 14, 2018
The Thing about Spiritual Disciplines. . .
2 Kings 5
Troy Taylor

We did it! We survived the great, capitalistic marketing machine that is modern Christmas! Congratulations! Now we settle into that magical time between Christmas and Easter. You know, the time that is marked by the shortest days of the year, the paying off of credit cards maxed out by Christmas extravagance, and the nagging suspicion that what we wanted probably isn't what we thought it was when we came up with a wish list two months ago! The trees and lights are put away, work and school start up again, and the warmth and promise of spring are a dim, flickering light barely glimpsed at the end of a long, dark, cold tunnel. Life settles into a daily grind.

Where has the power of Christmas gone now? The glory of the angelic choir? The mystery of the Incarnate Christ, almighty God packaged as an infant human being? Is this all that there is for this season? What about all of our desires that we have realized are unmet?

When the lights fade, the food is leftovers, friends and family go home, and we are left alone with our thoughts and questions, what makes believing come alive? What keeps our attention on the story of God, and who we are in that story?

This leads us into our scripture for today, the story of Naaman.

By every measure we have, Naaman is a success story. He has the high regard of his king, especially because he is a successful soldier. Others follow his orders, and he has courage in battle. He delivers victories, wealth and resources for his master. Some of these victories come against Israel, and yet even his captive servant wants what is good for him. This man's life seems like a well-oiled, military machine, everything working according to his plan, and in his control. The way he does things work for him. He leads a life of discipline, and is rewarded for it.

Except one thing. Naaman has leprosy, a disease that had no known cure. This is the one thing that Naaman can't make a success. There is no protocol to make this go away. It is completely out of control.

Naaman is also Aramean, which has a relationship to Israel that is very hard to pin down: they alternate between one of Israel's reliable allies and one of her most troublesome enemies. And Naaman's military success has included raiding Israel. Now, he is going to ask a foreign prophet of a foreign God for healing.

Naaman is presented with a choice in this story. Two voices shape his thinking, and call him to action in order to meet his need.

The first voice is the one he sets out to follow. It is the one that he has developed and fostered through countless hours of practice and discipline, and has worked for him in life. These habits send Naaman to his king, to help him gain access to the source of authority in Israel: the king. Naaman uses the considerable resources at his command to try to ensure success. Everything about this undertaking is huge. Letters between kings. The size of the gift that he brings — in today's dollars, almost three quarters of a billion dollars! The entourage he travels with. All of this smacks of power, wealth, and influence. This is how business is done! Within all of this grandiose posturing, the ask seems to almost fade into the details: heal this man of an incurable, dangerous disease.

He has lofty expectations, too. The king will arrange to have the prophet of God come out, meet with Naaman, and in full view of the people, he will raise up the hand of power, proclaim an incantation in the name of his God, and Naaman will be miraculously cleansed of his affliction. Perhaps he will be given a hard labour, demanding his strength and courage in order to gain God's favour. This is how experience tells him it will be.

Observe with me, as Naaman goes from a position of authority, surrounded by power and riches, to the absolute mundane.

First, standing in the court of the king, listening to the hushed whispers of horror as his unclean, disfigured skin is seen by those around him. But, surrounded by his entourage, and displaying the fabulous wealth of a kingdom given as a gift, Naaman is hoping for, even expecting, a favourable transaction.

He gets accused of trying to start a war.

This is not what he pictured happening! Fortunately, Elisha steps in, and saves the moment.

So, Naaman proceeds out of the palace, out of the halls of power and influence, and into the city, surrounded by the common lives of everyday people. Still surrounded by his influence (the people), his power (horses and chariots), and his wealth (wealth), he stops at the door of Elisha.

And Elisha doesn't even come out to meet him. Instead, he sends a servant out, who tells him to go take a ritual bath. In a muddy river.

This is the second voice calling Naaman to action. There will be no encounter with a prophet, no incantation and hand waving, no Herculean labour set for him to perform to call the attention of God to him, that he might be healed.

He has to take a bath.

This second voice is so completely contrary to what Naaman expected that he loses his mind. What about the gold? And silver? And the clothes! He has a letter! He is a

victorious general, the friend of kings, a man of courage and strength! All of these grand accomplishments, these things, don't matter at all. Elisha won't even meet with him, which means that Elisha has nothing to do with the healing — the only thing that matters will be that Naaman, the leper, will do what God asks.

Which is to take a bath. We watch as Naaman again takes the advice of a servant, and moves out of the bustling city of Samaria into the wilderness, where we finally see the end of his journey: a mere man, stripped of wealth, power, even his clothes, immersing himself in a ritual bath, alone with his thoughts and questions.

Something amazing happens when he does what is asked. It isn't in his power, wealth, and influence that Naaman finds what he needs. It is not in a flashy, once in a lifetime display of miraculous power that Naaman finds healing. Naaman meets God Almighty in the river. And his desire is fulfilled. He is healed!

Like Naaman, it isn't the glitz and flash of feasts and presents at Christmas time that will sustain us through January. We find ourselves moving from the promises of wealth and abundance into a wilderness of sorts, where daily life asserts its hold on us.

So, we started with Naaman as a Leper, looking to do business as normal in exchange for a miracle. We ended with Naaman as a healed man, having met God through a normal ritual. I believe that it is in the everyday, normal rituals that we too will meet with God in the time between the high holy days of Christmas and Easter. But, also like Naaman, we have other voices that promise us meaning and fulfillment.

In our culture, marketing promises to get us through the wilderness of daily life, if we keep on buying.

In 2014, ten companies combined for a whopping \$27.9 Billion spent in advertising. Just looking up these numbers, I encountered 25 advertisements on the single webpage I looked at! An average adult in North America receives one ad every minute and a half just from media alone. When all sources are considered, experts think that we see ten thousand brands or ads every day!

What message are we receiving from all of this?

Hungry? MacDonald's! I'm loving it!

Thirsty? Coca Cola. Thirsty, but healthy? Dasani bottled water.

Don't want to walk? Ford.

Want to walk? Chevy.

Want to run? Nike.

Lonely? Facebook.

Tired? Starbucks.

Bored? Shaw

Canadian? Tim Horton's.
Attractive? Lulu Lemon.

Companies pay billions of dollars to convince you that the secret to meaningful living is buying stuff. They try to convince us that who we are is wrapped up in what we wear, how big our friend list is, and who is on it! How big is your bank account, and how can you make it bigger? Ten thousand times a day, our society tells us that unlimited consumption, of things, resources, people, is normal in our pursuit of meaning. Friends, this is not normal.

Jesus says that none of these things, power, wealth, and stuff, do anything to respond to soul desires and needs. Just like Naaman's connections, wealth and discipline, they give a semblance of control, of fulfillment, but they take our focus from our deep, healthy longings, and instead offer superficial, thin parodies of real meaning and life.

We need a way to immerse ourselves in the message of Jesus, to soak it into our bones, our very DNA, until the Jesus' drowns out the voice of advertising and consumerism. It is Jesus' voice that should call us into action, that informs our political stance, our buying decisions, that shapes our desires. We need a way to pull our eyes off of how our culture tells us things work, just like Naaman needed to have his focus pulled away from who he was and what he could do. Just like him, it comes down to us, doing what we do, every day, but expecting to meet God there. We need a way for our life-giving connection to God to be sustained through the long in-betweens. In churches, we have a term for this re-focusing. We call them spiritual disciplines, and they are practices of turning our attention away from the messages of the world around us, and instead discovering the presence and experience of God in our daily lives. They are intentional practices of hospitality, generosity, worship, celebration, lament, gratitude. . . The list goes on and on! Over the centuries, as culture brought new challenges and desires into our lives, new disciplines within the church were developed to re-focus our minds on God's story.

Our desires are not bad. We were created to be in relationships with God, and with each other, and with creation around us! Humanity longs for these things, we need and desire them. Hunger is the desire for food. Gluttony is when that desire is not pursued in a healthy way! Justice is the longing for right relationships. Vengeance is justice twisted.

Time and again in the New Testament, Jesus meets people within their desires, and he asks a simple question: What do you want me to do for you? He asks it of mothers, disciples, lepers, beggars, sick people. Their need is often obvious, but he asks it anyways. Why do you suppose that is?

From her book, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Albert Calhoun writes this response to that question, "Jesus doesn't grant requests like a genie in a bottle. He works with people allowing their desires to draw him into the core conversations of life. For Jesus, requests for water, healing, rest, vindication, approval, status and so on all engage soul hungers. Misguided, self-destructive, true or addictive desperations and

desires opened doors to relationship.” She goes on to say, “Many of his deepest interactions with people get at two things: the true nature of people’s desires and a spiritual practice that helps them make space for God in their lives. . .”

Just like the solution to being tired isn’t actually caffeine but rather sleep, just like Elisha stripped Naaman of the status symbols that he tried to trade for healing, Jesus sees our desires and needs as a doorway into what we really need, relationship with him.

And this, then, is the whole point of today’s message:

Naaman went looking for a business transaction: gold, silver, clothing and influence traded for health and healing. But when it came down to it, he expected a miraculous, mystical encounter with a prophet of God. Instead of this, rather than something befitting of his identity as a mighty man, he is given a mundane practice of ritual washing, where he encounters God.

Similarly, we long for God to show up in our lives, yet we insist on pursuing life according to different rules of wealth, power and influence. Then, when we are desperate, we want God to show up with rich, life-filling, and meaning-giving miraculous intervention.

But it doesn’t work that way.

It is in the methodical, deliberate application of spiritual practices that we are drawn into life with God. God uses spiritual disciplines to correct our narrative about who we are, who God is, and what our response to the rest of creation needs to be in the Kingdom of God, and to respond to our soul desires. Spiritual disciplines immerse us in the practice, experience, and story of God the Creator, Jesus the Messiah, and Spirit the advocate, until all other voices fade into the background. Spiritual practices shape our desires, and focus us on reality, rather than the marketing messages all around us. More than ever before, we are bombarded with 10,000 un-gospel messages a day. We need to immerse ourselves in deeply connecting, authentic spiritual practices that slow us down, call us out of the race, focus us on each other, and on God.

A believer who does not immerse themselves in prayer and scripture, in celebration and generosity, condemns themselves to a life of shallow spiritual experience. Further, a church that does not devote themselves to regular worship, eating, study of scripture, and prayer together, will begin to confuse the messages of the society with those of the gospel, and will become no different from any other social organization. To be frank, take advantage of the opportunity around you. An example? Join a small group and study scripture together. Small groups are also excellent places to practice hospitality by hosting it in your home. You will come to know people in a way that allows you to celebrate together, and lament together. You will pray together. You can eat together. All of these spiritual disciplines find expression in one, simple practice of committing to a small group!

It is a long season between the glory of Christmas and the hope of Easter. This is why we need spiritual disciplines. They take us out of our own heads, and immerse us together in the space of spiritual presence with God. It is in the daily, mundane living of life that God waits to meet with us.