

ALL HE SAID WAS “WASH AND BE CLEAN”  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
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II Kings 5:1-14

Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King, was buried this week. At the time of her death a few days ago, she was in Mexico for some sort of medical treatment. I don't know what sort of treatment Mrs. King was undergoing, but we hear about people doing that fairly often. When the standard remedies for a disease have all been tried, and you hear about some herbal treatment that may not be permitted in this country, the thinking seems to be: “I might as well go for it. What have I got to lose?” When you have a disease, you do a lot of things that you would not do ordinarily.

Namaan, the great commander of the army of the Arameans, was standing on the bank of the Jordan River, thinking seriously of going for a swim in that river. In normal times Namaan would never have considered doing such a thing. The rivers back home, the Abana and the Pharpar, were among the most beautiful in that part of the world. Ordinarily, Namaan would never have considered leaving them and going for a swim in this muddy ditch called the Jordan.

But these were not ordinary times. The great commander of the Aramean army had contracted leprosy. Leprosy, the scourge of the world, and it didn't matter whether you were rich or poor, leprosy took its toll. We can imagine how difficult it was for Namaan to adjust to this disease. As a prominent person in his world, Namaan was accustomed to getting his way, to having people following his orders. But this disease did not take orders. Namaan had leprosy.

In one of the campaigns into Israel, a young woman had been captured and put to work as the slave of Namaan's wife. The woman told her mistress: “If Namaan went to the prophet in Israel, he would be cured.”

You'll try anything when you're sick, so Namaan went to his own king to make arrangements to go to Israel. Namaan arranged to have a letter of introduction, complete with the king's seal, to be presented to the king of Israel. He also took along a little gift: ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten Brooks Brothers suits. This is a powerful person at work, doing what powerful people do to get things done.

I knew a family back in Arkansas who were people of considerable means. They were generous folks, but they also enjoyed the influence and power that money brings. Once the teenager in the family came down with mononucleosis. Mono is fun to catch, but not much fun to endure. They went to the doctor, who prescribed bed rest. After a few miserable days flat on his back, his parents went back to the doctor. "Look," they said, we don't care what it costs. We want to skip the resting part and pay for the cure." But no amount of money cures mono. Bed rest is all there is.

That's Namaan. He travels along with his gift. Big money, big gift, big actions—that's what Namaan understands.

When he arrives at the palace of the king of Israel, that king is horrified. "You expect me to cure your leprosy? It sounds like you're trying to pick a fight." Word spread all through the region that the Aramean commander was in town, wanting to be cured of leprosy.

Elisha, the prophet of God, read about it in the newspaper, and sent word to Namaan: "Come down here and I'll cure you of your disease." So Namaan headed down to Elisha's house, a convoy of limousines with those little flags on the fenders, complete with motorcycle escort with sirens blaring.

This imposing entourage pulls up in the front yard, and—nothing. Namaan, the great commander of the Aramean army, waits in the yard of this prophet for some sign. One of his associates honks on the horn to be sure Elisha knows they're out there. Finally, the door to the house cracks open, and out timidly comes, not Elisha, but a servant. "My master says go dip seven times in the Jordan River, and you will be clean." And he goes back in the house. Elisha never does appear. He's inside watching "Days of Our Lives," and doesn't want to be bothered with such trivialities as the Aramean commander.

For his part, Namaan is furious. "I thought at least the prophet would come out and wave his hands and smack me up against the forehead like Benny Hinn. And now he's telling me to go bathe in that stinky creek? I won't do it."

But then his servants come forward and do a very courageous thing: they dare to challenge their boss. They do it as humbly as they can, using a term of high respect: “Father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn’t you have done that? How much more, when all he said was ‘Wash and be clean’?”

To his credit, Namaan does not fuss at the servants. Instead, he takes their words seriously: “All he said was, ‘Wash and be clean.’” And so it is that he finds himself standing on the bank of this puny river. He takes off his imposing battle armor, and his resplendent uniform, and the garments under that, until he is standing in his birthday suit. The people with him are doing their best to stand respectfully, but every once and a while Namaan can hear an uncontrolled snicker, as the great commander of the Aramean army, naked as the day he was born, carefully makes his way down to the water’s edge.

It takes him awhile to find a place that is even deep enough for him to immerse his entire body. And then he begins the process. He goes under—the water is colder underneath than he had realized—and comes back up. One. He goes down again. Two. Now he is thinking only of the number: three, four, five—he’s getting a little out of breath now—six, seven. He comes up and looks at his skin, and it like that of a five-year-old child.<sup>1</sup> He is clean.

We might say that Namaan was cured because he did something—he followed the command of the prophet and dipped seven times in the river. But before he did something, he had to stop doing something. He had to stop relying on his reputation, or his power, or his gifts of gold and silver and clothing. Can you see him there on the banks of that river, taking off his garments, his armor, but also taking off all the power, the prestige, the reputation? In the end he took it all off, as they say, and gave himself completely over to a power greater than himself that he perhaps did not fully understand. All he knew is that he had this disease, and he was willing to do anything. And he was healed.

The word of scripture that has kept coming back to me as I have read the story of Namaan is the word of Jesus: “Unless you become as a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 18:3). That’s what Namaan did. He put it all aside, and became as a child, and trusted in the power of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 160.

It has been a long time since I have gone as a guest to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. But I remember always finding such meetings to be very special, even inspirational. I almost found myself envying the people in that meeting. I didn't envy their difficult journey, but I envied the place where they had arrived. The people in that meeting had lost everything—job and money and family, and sometimes close to losing life itself. They had lost reputation and dignity. They had discovered what it meant to cast themselves totally on what the 12 Steps call “a power higher than myself,” and what we would call the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They were able to stand and say: “I'm Joe, and I'm an alcoholic.” They didn't have to prove anything to anyone. They didn't have to pretend they were powerful, or in control. They had lost all of that. And in so doing they had been found by God's grace. That is what Namaan found. He took it all off—clothing and power and dignity and control, and gave himself over to God. And he was healed.

Martin Luther, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer, saw in this story an anticipation of the sacrament of baptism. We have to be careful here, because this story takes place long before Jesus, and long before the early church practiced the act of baptizing in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But in a way, Luther was correct. In the Christian faith you are marked with the water. That's all you have to do, just as Elisha's servant told Namaan. You don't perform anything, you don't accomplish anything, you don't take credit for anything. All Jesus says is: “Wash and be clean.”

Our world is full of different organizations. And one of the ways you know what kind of organization it is, is by the requirements the organization has for being a member. If it's a symphony orchestra, you have to audition, and there's lots of cutthroat competition for the few openings. If it's athletics, you have to try out under the watchful eye of the coach. And then you check the bulletin board in the locker room to see if your name is on the “cut” list.” If it's the sorority or fraternity, anyone can blackball you to keep you out. In your company you may be subject to performance reviews in order to keep your job.

In the church, you don't have to be better, or more accomplished, or prove anything. You get in the way Namaan did, by going under the water, by giving up all the rest. Unless you become as a little child, you shall not inherit the kingdom of God. You get in by being baptized, and any child can do it.<sup>2</sup>✠

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<sup>2</sup> From William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, p. 143.