

Surprising Answers II Kings 5:1-14

On a cold but clear midwinter day in Northwestern Pennsylvania, I sat with a family in the surgical waiting area of an Erie hospital during a surgery for a member of my church. When the surgery ended and we received word that it had gone well, I made my way back to the hospital's parking garage, and back to the interstate. Throughout the day, the weather had changed – it was still cold – however, it had started to snow. As I drove it seemed to come down harder and harder, until I couldn't see anything. I'd always lived in snowy areas – so the snow itself wasn't bothering me a whole lot – however, when I couldn't see, I got a little nervous, sat up a little straighter, held the steering wheel a little tighter, and did the only thing I could do at that point: I prayed. “Lord,” I said. “I can't see a thing – help me get home safely.” The words weren't off my lips when I started looking around for the answer to my prayer. I'm sure I expected that the snow would lighten immediately, or that I would develop a deep sense of certainty as the car moved down the road. Neither of those things happened, but the answer to my prayer came to me in these clear words: “Turn on the windshield wipers!”

Not exactly the divine intervention I was looking for, but just the word I needed to hear. I turned on the wipers. The snow continued to fall, the roads continued to be slick, but I could see the road and what was happening around me.

It's been nearly 10 years since that midwinter evening - but two things continue to stand apart for me about that night. First of all: I always remember to turn my windshield wipers on! But secondly: God's activity in our lives can speak clearly in surprising ways – ways that are surprisingly ordinary.

Today's passage provides us a number of opportunities to see how God is at work in the life of Naaman, a Syrian general. We can see how God used unlikely people and unexpected events to change his life and bring him into an awareness of the power and presence of God

When we meet Naaman, we quickly learn that he is a pretty important person: he's a commander in the army of Aram (also known as Syria) and very highly regarded by the King. He's good at what he does and has led Syria to victory over Israel. The narrative even attributes this victory to God – even though Naaman is not a Hebrew.

But there's one problem: Naaman has developed a serious skin disease, which is described as leprosy. Skin diseases were greatly feared in the ancient world; some were contagious, disfiguring – and it wasn't easy to tell which ones were the serious ones. As a result, most civilizations required that a person with a serious skin disease be isolated from the community, no matter how successful – thereby bringing an end to a career & lifestyle.

We're not given much information about the particular kind of skin disease Naaman had – what we do know is that it had become enough of a problem that when word of help comes, he takes notice and takes action. Strangely enough, this word comes from his wife's young Israelite servant girl - a slave taken captive during Syria's victory over Israel. It is surprising that this young girl, taken from her home and enslaved, made to serve the wife of her captor, would reach out with information that could help her enemy. But then it's also surprising that this great military leader would take her counsel seriously; after all, she's a woman, she's a servant and she's an enemy. And to return to the land of that enemy – without an army, but only a guard detail - asking for help, trusting it will be there, well, that is more than a surprise – it's shocking, even scandalous.

As scandalous as it is, he does go, not as a conqueror, but as a supplicant, bearing gifts, and more important, a letter from his king to Israel's king with instructions that Naaman is to be cured. It's at this point that we finally meet someone whose actions don't surprise us. The defeated Israelite King is confronted by one of the major players in the war that led to his nation's defeat, and is commanded to do something which he knows full well is beyond his power. We can imagine his angst and his response is every bit of what we'd expect it to be: "Who does he think I am – he's just looking for a reason to fight."

At this point, Elisha, the successor to the Prophet Elijah, enters the scene. He urges the king to calm down and send Naaman his way. And so Naaman and his entourage arrive at Elisha's house, ready for action - but not just any action. Naaman has come a long way, and he's looking for some awesome displays of power. So when Elisha's messenger – not even the prophet himself - comes out of the house with the simple, directive to "go wash in the Jordan River 7 times," the anticlimax is more than Naaman can bear. His sense of power and authority comes back to him:

"Hey! I'm an important man,
and we've got better rivers in Damascus than Israel!"

Ever since the diagnosis, he's been humbling himself, taking the counsel of a slave girl; asking permission and endorsement from his king to go into enemy territory and play nice; and now this lack of respect from Elisha! It's no surprise that he storms off 'in a rage.'

And Elisha lets him go.

But once again, God's word comes from a servant: "If he asked you to do something hard, wouldn't you do it? You've come all this way – just give it a chance." Surprisingly, given his frustration at this point, Naaman hears this counsel and goes to the river, following the instructions of the prophet, and his flesh is restored. The final word in the narrative we read is that Naaman, a conquering enemy of God's people, now knows of the presence and the power of the their God.

This passage is filled with surprises as we walk with Naaman on this journey: from the captive, kind-hearted Israelite servant, to Elisha's mundane instructions, to the bold words of Naaman's servants. Most surprising of all is the way in which God is revealed to Naaman – and that God chooses to be revealed at all.

Naaman's rank and reputation tell us he was used to giving instructions, being treated with respect, with deference, with obedience – used to being in charge. Yet nothing that happens here is under Naaman's control; it's the servants who must be obeyed, because they know the shots are being called by a higher authority.

For someone used to being in control, the journey to the acceptance of that authority- the God of Israel - is a humbling one, challenging his sensibilities at every turn. Sometimes Naaman 'gets it,' just as we do - yet at points he nearly misses it altogether. We can't help but be reminded that the ways of God are far from controllable. Over and over again, we find that God chooses to reach out to us in ways we could never foresee and frequently don't understand. And, like Naaman, God chooses to remind us of our place, working in ways that are humbling. After all, in my own moment of angst on a snowy road in Pennsylvania, God didn't choose to offer me a divine intervention of cinematic proportions, but rather an elementary lesson in bad weather driving. And it was a little embarrassing to discover I'd forgotten something so basic.

Most of us would quickly concede that control is an illusion; there is very little, if anything, over which we exercise real control. Even so, each of us lives within some set of expectations, a lens

through which we look at life, perspectives to which we've become accustomed and upon which we depend. Because of that, like Namaan, we often find ourselves surprised or even confounded by the avenues God chooses to make his way to us. And, like Naaman, we run the risk of nearly missing the big picture - missing the opportunity for a deepened awareness of God, missing the grace God is willing to share with us.

Over and over again we are reminded that we cannot contain God by our expectations, or the way in which God calls to us. As uncomfortable as this can be, we are also reminded that even when we don't 'get it or deserve it,' God continues to provide wisdom and grace in surprising places, as we seek to be ever more faithful in what we are and what we do.

Let us pray:

O God, open us ever more fully to your voice calling, leading us onward. Help us to see you in the unexpected spaces in our lives. In Christ, Amen.