

SO EASY IT'S HARD

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But (Naaman's) 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'?" (2 Kings 5:13)

Today's Old Testament reading from 2nd Kings reminds me of the oft told story about the lone rock climber free-soloing a perilous mountain. Up and up he went along the sheer cliff that rose before him, until the worst thing that could possibly happen, happened. A foothold that he thought was secure was in fact insecure. It gave way when he put his weight on it, and he began a rapid downward slide. Fortunately, at the last possible moment, he was able to grab onto a thin branch that was jutting out the side of the mountain. It bent under his weight and seemed about to break. Holding on for his life, the climber looked down and saw what was at least a thousand-foot drop. He looked up, and saw the peak of the mountain far above him, and no handholds or ledges within his reach. There, for the first time in his life, he prayed.

You know the gist of his prayer. He looked up to the sky and said, "Is there anyone up there? O God, if you are there, help me!" God answered, "I am here, my son. I will help you. But you must trust me completely. Do you trust me completely, my son?" The man replied in desperation, "Yes, Lord. *What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the Pit?*" I trust you completely. "Good, my son," said the Lord, "I love hearing today's Psalm (30:10, appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary, quoted back to me. Now do exactly what I say to do. In order for me to save you, you must let go of the branch." The climber looked down and saw the great drop. He looked up and saw the bright sky. Then he said, "Is there, perhaps, anyone else up there?"

Naaman the Syrian, whom we meet in today's reading from 2nd Kings, was a bit like the mountain climber. He wanted his salvation all right, but he wanted it his way and not the way God prescribed. Naaman was a powerful man, the commander of the king of Aram's army – Aram being another name for Syria. The time was approximately 800 years before Jesus, a period when Israel and Syria were constantly at war, conducting frequent raids across each other's borders. No doubt, Naaman had led many a successful battle against Israel. But Naaman had a problem he couldn't solve on his own. He was a leper, and no one in Syria could cure him.

It so happened that Naaman had a slave girl in his household, a young Israelite who had been captured on one of his raids. When the girl mentioned to Naaman's wife that she knew of a prophet in Israel who could heal him, Naaman was soon crossing the border again into the land of his foe. But this time, instead of brandishing weapons, he brought expensive gifts from the king of Syria, and a royal letter imploring the king of Israel to heal Naaman. When the king of Israel received the gifts and the letter he panicked. He didn't know how to cure leprosy. Surely it was some sort of a trick to goad him into another war. The king's distress must have been great because Elisha the prophet heard about it all the way up in Samaria, some forty miles away. Elisha sent word that Naaman should come to him. Thus, Naaman and his considerable traveling party packed up the gifts and turned towards Samaria. So far Naaman proved completely cooperative with the plan. He trusted everyone advising him, and did everything that was asked of him.

It was outside the house of Elisha, however, where Naaman's patience began to wear thin. Apparently, Naaman thought the least Elisha could do was come out, meet him personally, and

dazzle him with some impressive Hebrew hocus pocus. Instead, Elisha merely sent out a servant, who instructed Naaman to bathe in the Jordan River. Naaman was miffed. He felt doubly disrespected: First, Elisha wouldn't even show his face. Second, Elisha directed the mighty warrior to bathe seven times in the muddy waters of the Jordan River. What was this? Probably a set-up for a practical joke, or worse, a trap to extract revenge for all the raids Naaman had led. They would catch him with his pants down, literally. It was a crazy idea, and Naaman wasn't going to fall for it. Naaman didn't even bother to ask, "Is there anyone else in there?" Instead, he stomped off with his dignity intact but his salvation a wreck. It was all too hard.

"No," said the servants of Naaman. The problem, they surmised, was not that it was too hard. Rather, it was all too easy. So they said to Naaman, "*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'?*" As we heard, Naaman finally agreed to do what Elisha commanded him to do, and he was healed. What we didn't hear, just beyond where today's reading stops, is how Naaman returned to Elisha and declared, "*Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel. (5:15)*"

The tale of Naaman the Syrian is truly one of the great short stories in all of the Bible. Through an improbable series of events, a Gentile not only meets the one, true God, but also learns to trust in God. Eight-hundred years later, when Jesus was preaching in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, he reached for the story of Naaman to make a point about the universality of God's grace (Luke 4:27). God's grace, he implied, breaks out of the narrow confines we set for it and is active in the lives of all people and cultures. Thus, through all the twists and turns of life we can trust that God is working his purpose out not only for us, but even through us. God is good, and God is working for our good. Trust in God. It's that easy.

No, says the rock climber. I don't like the plan. Is anyone else up there? Perhaps I'll just try to hang on and figure it out for myself. It's all very easy to say we can trust that God is at work in the world, but it strains credibility when we look to the world to test the thesis. You can scan the news and pick your own poison. I was struck this week by the mysterious death of Tyler Skaggs, the 27-year old pitching ace of the Los Angeles Angels. On Monday afternoon, when he didn't report for the game that evening, he was found dead in his hotel room. Apparently, he simply died in his sleep. By all accounts he was a terrific person: newly married with his whole life ahead of him, a professional athlete in top physical condition. Trust that God is at work in the world for our healing and salvation? I would be wary of preaching such tidings of peace to the family of Tyler Skaggs these days, and to anyone else who has suffered a loss. Sometimes the goodness of God hard to see, and even harder to trust.

It was just such a hard message to trust in God that Jesus gave to seventy of his followers before sending them out on a preaching mission (Luke 10:1-20). He warned them that they would face fierce opposition. They were going out *as lambs into the midst of wolves*. What is more, he charged them not to rely on the typical tools of the traveler: *carry no purse, no bag, no sandals*. They were to announce peace upon the households where they stayed and heal the sick who were there. It sounds great! Sign us up. Then perhaps a real, live leper like Naaman the Syrian stands before us, and we might react like the king of Israel who tore his clothes and essentially declared: "I'm not God! I don't know how to heal leprosy." And so it is with us. We feel ill-equipped and overmatched in the mission to go forth into the world in witness to God's love. "Sure, sign us up" is what we say with our lips. But "no thanks, it's too hard" is what I suspect we believe in our hearts.

I wonder if the servants of Naaman can help us. If you recall, they suggested to Naaman that salvation was hard for him precisely because it was so easy. "All you have to do, Naaman, is take the bath. Your pride isn't going to cure your leprosy, so let go of it." Trust God and let go is

the first of four general guidelines that I hear in today's readings. For those who want to cooperate with God's work of salvation, and not frustrate it, these four headings may be helpful. Naaman let go, and the kingdom of God came near. In the same story, see how easy it was for the young slave girl to participate in the kingdom of God. She knew of a prophet who could cure Naaman, so she spoke up and the kingdom of God drew near. God worked through her for the salvation of another. Telling people about Jesus makes us all nervous, but a popular phrase boils it down to this: Christian mission is simply one beggar sharing with another where to find bread. The young girl knew where to find bread, so she spoke up. Trust God and speak up is the second way we can participate in the kingdom.

The third is simply this: fear not. Note well, fear not is religious speak for don't panic, or calm down, or take a time-out. Generally speaking, these latter three are not what you want to say to people in crisis, or even an angry spouse. Take it from me, you do not want to say "calm down," or "don't panic," or "take a time out." So "fear not" is the Biblical, pastoral choice. However you want to phrase it, someone needed to tell the king of Israel not to fear. Calm down. Don't panic. Take a time-out and rally the resources of the community. No, he couldn't cure leprosy, but someone in Israel whom he must have known could. Enter Elisha. Trust God and fear not.

Fourth and finally, step out. We can talk endlessly about God. We can speculate forever about the mission of the church and the proper way to engage a dangerous world. At some point, however, we have to step out and try to participate in the work of the kingdom, as Jesus charged the seventy to do. We can expect failure, and we can expect success. But only if we trust God, step out, and try. Let go, speak up, fear not, and step out. I don't mean to trivialize how hard it can be to trust that God is working his purpose out for us and through us. But sometimes I wonder if what makes it so hard is precisely how easy it is.

Many of you know the old classic by C.S. Lewis called The Great Divorce. It's a little book about a group of people who take a bus ride from hell to heaven. Once there, they are absolutely free to stay for all eternity. But here's the catch: they have to choose to stay. They have to want to stay – not on their terms, but on heaven's terms. Believe it or not, most of them say "no thanks, this is too hard," and choose to go back to hell.

One man refuses to stay because he is greeted in heaven by someone he knew on earth to be a murderer. He thinks it's unjust that this man has been forgiven. It's not what he deserved. At least in hell you get what you deserve, so he goes back. An English bishop goes back to hell because he decides he'd rather continue the endless process of talking and speculating about God instead of actually meeting God. Entering the kingdom would mean giving up his theological quest, which he cannot do. He's so wrapped up in the journey that he's totally lost sight of the Destination. So he goes back. A woman won't stay because in the kingdom of God she'll have to forgive her husband whom she nagged to death. A humorless man won't stay because he learns that his wife who preceded him in death has been happy in heaven – happy *without* him! How hard it was for all of them to enter the kingdom of God. They didn't like the way the place was managed. None could trust and enter into joy. Is there anyone else up there?

If you read The Great Divorce – which I highly recommend you do, even if for a second time – you may find yourself wondering how these people could be so foolish as to choose hell over heaven. But then you may remember that Jesus says the kingdom of heaven draws near to us in this life, not just in the next. And in your better moments you may remember, with regret, the times when the kingdom of God came near to you, and the door opened, but you did not step through it. Today's readings can help us to be awake and alert for the next time the kingdom of God draws near. What it will take to enter is as easy – and as hard – as trusting in God.