

# It's That Simple

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*Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)*  
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*Text: 2 Kings 5:1-15a*

Two dads were at a playground, watching their kids play on the swings, and one of the children, a little girl, fell down hard on her knee, and she cried out for help. Her dad scooped her up, sat her down on a bench, and took a look. The knee was red from the impact, but the skin wasn't broken, and she could bear weight on it. Nonetheless, the dad pulled a BandAid out of the bag, stuck it on her knee, laid a kiss on top of it, and sent the girl back out to play. In three minutes' time, she'd forgotten all about it.

"Why did you use a BandAid?" asked the other dad. "She didn't need it."

"You don't understand," said the first dad. "The BandAid wasn't for her knee. It's a sign. It's how she knows everything is going to be OK."

Sometimes it's the little things that heal.

A BandAid. A hug and a kiss. The squeeze of a sympathetic hand. A hot meal delivered at just the right time. A moment shared in a quiet spot in the woods beside a flowing stream.

Sometimes it's little things that heal us. We forget this sometimes. But I bet if you think about it for a moment you can come up with some of the ways you have been comforted, healed, and given peace through simple deeds, simple gifts, simple gestures. And maybe there have been simple, ordinary, commonsensical things you have done that made all the difference to someone else.

Today's story from the Second Book of Kings is about a simple thing that heals, and how difficult it can be for people to trust in the power of ordinary things—particularly for those who are wealthy and strong. But it is through simple things, and through ordinary people, that God pours out grace and blessing.

This fall we have been following the story of God and God's people through the Old Testament, and we've reached the time of prophets and kings. After Solomon, whose prayer we talked about last week, God's people became divided into two kingdoms—Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. Today's story takes place in the northern kingdom, which was bigger and more at the crossroads of international affairs. As we can tell from the story, this was a dangerous neighborhood. Raiders from neighboring countries could come and take wealth and captives or, if their king was so inclined, could raise a larger force to conquer and subdue the kingdom itself.

Remember, though, the story we told some weeks back about God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. God promised that through their family, through their descendants, that all the families of the world would be blessed. The story we read today is meant to illustrate that promise being fulfilled. God's blessings are not meant for the people of Israel alone. They are meant for all the people of the world—and so those blessings begin to trickle outward in surprising ways.

Naaman is a successful general in the army of Aram, an ancient nation in what would be Syria today. But he suffers from a skin disease. And maybe it was Hansen's disease, which is what we call leprosy today. But it may have been eczema or psoriasis

or ringworm or impetigo, or some other disease of the skin—in the ancient world, “leprosy” was a broad, catch-all word for all kinds of skin disease.

But lucky for him there is an enslaved girl from Israel in his household who speaks up. I imagine that wasn’t an especially smart thing for enslaved people to do—to comment on their captors’ health like this. But she does—she says that there is a prophet in Israel who has the power to heal this kind of thing. And Naaman takes her seriously enough that he asks permission from the king of Aram to go to Israel and check it out. There’s a little bit of comedy in the story when Naaman reaches the royal palace in Samaria, and the king freaks out because he thinks Aram is trying to set him up with an impossible request as a pretext for declaring war. But the prophet Elisha hears about this foreign visitor and says, “Don’t worry about it. Just send him to me.”

We’re told later in the story what Naaman thinks is going to happen. He thinks there is going to be some elaborate ceremony, where the prophet himself will come out to meet him, waving his hand over the diseased spot and offering prayers. Something big, with lots of pomp and circumstance. I mean, what else would be appropriate for a general of his stature, traveling with a huge company of horses and chariots?

But that doesn’t happen. Instead, Elisha doesn’t even come out to say hello. He sends a messenger with instructions: Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and you’ll be healed.

The Jordan River, in this part of the Holy Land, is not very impressive. It’s not a spa. It’s a small, muddy creek. It doesn’t make you think “health” or “refreshment.” So Naaman is insulted. Not only did the Elisha refuse to see him, but the prophet gave him an instruction that was ridiculous on its face. He rides away steaming over this humiliating treatment and a wasted trip.

Then his servants convince him to give it a try. “Come on,” they say, “if you’d been given some hard task to do, you would have done that, right? Why not do this one thing?”

In this story, the kings are clueless. The general who needs healing is so proud and arrogant that he nearly misses out on the blessing he needs to receive. It’s those at the margins who know where God’s goodness is to be found. It’s an enslaved girl, captured from her homeland, without standing or power in the world, who sends Naaman where he needs to go. It’s Naaman’s servants who make the case to him just to try and do what the prophet said. God’s grace, God’s truth, God’s healing comes not from the centers of human power and wealth and prestige, but instead bubble up from the edges. It’s the shepherds dwelling out in the fields who receive the good news of Jesus’ birth. It’s the unlettered fishermen of Galilee whom Jesus appoints to carry the good news across the world. It’s the little things, and it’s the poor, ordinary folk—not the wise and mighty—who carry God’s goodness.

We ignore these voices at our peril. Naaman might have carried his leprosy to his grave, were it not for his servants. The king of Israel may have ended up in a war, but for the crazy hermit prophet Elisha. What is it that we need to be healed from? What wounds do we carry, that can only be cured by listening to those who lack power and status? The Bible identifies the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner as those who especially need to be defended and provided for. Who are the vulnerable in our own time?

The poor, always.

People of color, particularly African Americans and native peoples.

LGBTQ people, especially young people whose homes and families are not a safe refuge.

The stranger, the sojourner, the immigrant.

People like Naaman, people like me, whose background and families and connections have opened doors of opportunity for us—we too often dismiss the stories of people who aren't like us. That dirty river can't possibly heal me. That story about prejudice and discrimination can't have happened the way you told it, that story you tell about your family's experience in this country can't be true. It's exaggeration, it's overblown, it's an agenda, it's whatever. We turn away in anger, like Naaman, and we close our hearts to the things that we need in order to be healed and blessed by God. We need the stories that make us uncomfortable, the lead us to new and challenging experiences, if we're going to receive the grace God wants to give us.

Because sometimes it's the simple things, the little things that heal us. And often we need to become simple, become humble—we need to get out of our own way to receive those things.

"Wash and be clean," said Elisha to Naaman. God says the same to us about the water of our baptism. Eat and be full, God says, as we come to the Lord's Table. Ordinary things—tap water in a bowl, a loaf of bread, a cup of juice—carry God's grace to us. These sacraments we celebrate as part of our worship tradition are meant in part to show us how the ordinary can become extraordinary, with God's blessing.

And maybe if we can start to believe that, we can see that in the same way, we are meant to be sacraments too...

... when we say, "I'm sorry."

... when we listen, just listen, to someone who's grieving or overwhelmed.

... when do someone a kindness just because.

If the Jordan river can heal, then so can you and I, if God chooses to move through us.

Thanks be to God, who heals the sick in spite of themselves. Thanks be to God, who gives wisdom and insight to the simple and lowly, if we're humble enough to listen. And thanks be to God, who fills ordinary things and ordinary people with overflowing grace to share. Amen.