

All Saints

After grad school and an internship, Daryl got a post-doctoral fellowship at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. I joined the staff at Mayo. The division of internal medicine I worked in was the one that saw people from outside the area. Because of Mayo's fame, there were lots of very wealthy people that came from all over the world.

The King of Jordan was a patient there. And I'm not breaking any confidentiality here. His visits were public, not least because a motorcade with police escort transported him from the airport to the clinic and the police stopped all traffic while he passed. Kind of hard to keep that secret.

He had a whole floor of the hospital to himself. The floor was redone in a lavish royal style. Although Mayo provided excellent care no matter how wealthy someone was, there were some perks to being a king.

That's more like what Naaman expects here. But it's not what he gets. He doesn't actually even get to see the prophet who's supposed to cure him.

He is furious about that. He sees himself as far too important to be treated the way Elisha is treating him.

Let's talk for just a minute about Elisha. We're about 100 years out from the reign of Solomon where we were last week. Elisha is a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. He was the successor to Elijah. The northern kingdom was by definition not worshipping in the right place, which was Jerusalem.

But worship of other gods was also rampant – especially the God Baal. Many of the miracles of both Elijah and Elisha were to prove God as the one true God and Baal as a sham.

The ministry of later prophets was more about speaking for God. Elisha's ministry as a prophet was more enactment – he acted for God. He did of course speak, but he also performed miracles and signs.

The key there is the same as for the later prophets – prophets are those whom God works through. Naaman needs to know here that it's God who does the healing, not the prophet somehow acting out of his own power. That's why Elisha doesn't go near him.

God works through the water. Water is a symbol of God's actions from the very beginning of creation, when a wind from God blew over the waters.

This isn't a baptism...or even a traditional Jewish ritual cleansing. But it does something similar...and it gives us a way to connect this story to All Saints Sunday.

Because what happens to Naaman is nothing short of death and resurrection. The passage tells us that Naaman was suffering from leprosy. The authors of scripture often called any skin disease leprosy, so we don't necessarily know for sure that's what Naaman had.

Leprosy isn't fatal, but it is very disfiguring and can result in permanent damage. And, like a lot of skin diseases, it's very visible.

In Israel and Judah...and most other places in the world, lepers were not allowed to live with other people. They were often segregated into leper colonies.

The United States had leper colonies, the oldest one in Louisiana. It only closed in 1999.

Naaman doesn't appear to have been excluded from society the way lepers often were. Maybe it was early, or maybe Syria had different practices. Or maybe it was a different skin disease.

But whatever it is, it has a significant negative impact on his life...significant enough he's willing to trust what this servant girl says. He's willing to make this trip to see the prophet Elisha. And he's willing to pay a lot of money.

His experience with Elisha does not impress him. At first reluctant...even insulted by Elisha's indifference, Naaman's staff eventually convince him.

He hadn't been asked to do something hard, just go into the water. What's the big deal?

Finally, he does. He knows he's been defeated by something his own strength and power couldn't conquer. And he comes out clean and clear-skinned. No longer will he need to arrange his life around his condition. It's a new start.

But he also goes into the water as a powerful and wealthy general who is full of his own importance. He's convinced of the superiority of not only himself, but his own nation...his own gods. He comes out changed from that too. He now knows that Israel's God is the true God.

He even comes out of the water with the humility to confess this newfound belief to Elisha and the Israelites. He really is transformed, both inside and outside. This too is a new start.

We don't hear too much about Naaman after this, but the story does go on a bit further. Naaman tried to pay Elisha, but Elisha refused any payment. So Naaman asks instead for two wagon loads of dirt so that when he returns to his own land, he can worship the one true God

on the proper land. He seems to be making a commitment to this God he has just come to know.

Not formally a baptism to be sure, but through these waters of the Jordan, Naaman was transformed.

This image of healing water speaks to us as we remember our own baptism and our joining of the communion of saints.

At confirmation Wednesday night, we talked about Martin Luther's term saint and sinner. We are broken...we doubt God...we doubt God's love...we get puffed up with ourselves, or conversely, we despise ourselves. Out of our own pain, we hurt other people. We are sinners.

But because of Christ and our baptism into his death and resurrection, we are also completely saints. Those waters of baptism have an amazing power to heal, not unlike the Jordan River into which Naaman finally plunged.

Healing is ultimately what this day is about. We hear about the river of the water of life in God's city...a place where we get this beautiful image of a tree nourished by that river...a tree whose leaves will be for the healing for all.

It's a day that we also celebrate the ultimate healing that happens for God's people. That ultimate healing is the final death and resurrection.

Today we remember that the Saints aren't just a few people with the right set of attributes to be called a saint. We are all the Saints. We have experienced the healing powers of the waters of baptism. On this day...and hopefully every day we remember that baptism.

Our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection does have the power to heal. Like Naaman, our baptism works continuously in us to heal our own arrogance and self-obsession.

Our baptism works continuously in us to strengthen our faith. It works continuously to strengthen our ability to trust that we are forgiven and have a new start.

But in this life we still suffer...and we still sometimes cause suffering. We are both sinner and saint.

There remains yet one final healing...a healing begun in baptism...a healing that is completed by the waters of the river of life. A healing that happens at death. The promise is that as Saints, healing continues into eternity...it's a promise that when we die, we join the saints triumphant. We experience the final healing. And that healing can no longer be undone by sickness, sin, or death.