

GOD'S TIMING

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems
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Words and Action: The Fruit of the Spirit

have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.” But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. But his 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?’” So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

2 Kings 5:1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I

WHAT TYPE OF A PROBLEM SOLVER ARE YOU?

Are you the patient type, willing to wait months or years to work your way through a situation?

Or are you one to get right in the middle and do whatever it takes to find a solution?

Take the Rubik’s Cube puzzle, for example.

Some of you solved it after a few tries, while others twisted the @#!% thing until it was a mess of jumbled colors with no hope of returning to it’s original state.

I apologize for boasting, but I practiced until I could solve the Rubik’s Cube in less than three minutes. There’s a pattern, you see. I found the pattern by concentrating, and then applying . . . a screwdriver. If I popped the cube apart, I could put it back together, and voila! Problem solved.

Today, we continue our series on the Fruit of the Spirit, a reference to a phrase from the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22. What does this faith in Jesus look like when it comes to fruition? Thus far, we have covered joy and peace. Today’s topic is patience. When people think of patience in the Bible, they often consider names like Job, who endured great suffering, or Sarah and Abraham, who waited decades to have a child.

We don’t often think of Naaman. Whether you’re new to church or have been around for many years, I’d like you to get to know Naaman, the powerful military leader in what is modern day Syria.

While most of us cannot exactly relate to being an army commander, many of us do have something in common with him—a desire to fix things on our terms, and by throwing as many resources at the problem as it takes without really considering where God could be active in the situation.

In this case, Naaman has contracted leprosy. Especially at the time, this was a very big deal. People could assume that the leprosy was some kind of divine punishment. A normal person with leprosy was treated as a total outcast, required to live alone and shout “unclean, unclean” when encountering others. (Leviticus 13) Naaman, however, was not a normal person. He was a key to national security, ensuring that those around him would take all possible steps to find a cure. Would it be a special potion or healer? Would a special combination of leaves and berries do the trick?

A girl Naaman’s soldiers had captured and assigned to serve Naaman’s wife told them of a prophet she was certain could cure the leprosy. The military leader immediately took action, doing what worldly leaders do. He gathered up significant amounts of silver and gold and set out to find this prophet, who turned out to be Elisha. Naaman made his way to Elisha’s house with his full entourage of horses and chariots, expecting to be greeted with the respect that he believed a very important person deserved.

Elisha doesn’t so much as come out to say hello. Instead, he sends a messenger. The messenger didn’t bring any fancy balm or special feather. He brought a simple message: “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

Naaman was furious and understandably skeptical. Renowned biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann explains that “The general was insulted by the piddling, muddy Jordan.” Naaman had access to other, much more impressive rivers. He was used to getting what he wanted.

After Naaman’s people work to calm down the general, he finally accepts Elisha’s instruction. He begrudgingly goes into the underwhelming river and washes seven times. His skin is clear and restored to the condition of a young boy.

There are vital details of this story that were and are countercultural. First, a slave girl was the first to identify the solution to Naaman’s problem. Not the general’s advisors or other high ranking officials, but someone with virtually no status. Second, Naaman was not a believer before all of this. He was not supposed to be one God’s chosen people. Aram was enemy territory, and Naaman was doing just fine with worldly power. Naaman’s healing would have been upsetting to Israelites wondering why the divine would extend mercy to one of their enemies. The story reminds us that God’s love does not observe national boundaries or avoid people who haven’t muttered some creed or confession.

Finally, Naaman is healed and does confess that there is one true God. Naaman is so moved that he insists that he pay Elisha for the treatment, but Elisha will not accept a single shekel. God wants Naaman to know that there are some things that cannot be fixed with power, prestige, or privilege.

What about us? How many forms of societal and spiritual leprosy do we attempt to solve with an endless amount of money, only to realize that our efforts were futile. At the national level, you need not look far to find many examples. In our individual lives, how many times do we try to fill voids by buying something?

How often do we convince ourselves that we are so important we need to check our phone every 2 minutes because the world will end if we don’t respond to that text?

Why could Elisha see the solution, when the powerful Naaman could not? As a prophet, he was tuned into God. He had studied under his mentor, Elijah, and knew how fleeting the things of this world are. He was seeking his center and could be patient as a result.

Approximately 800 years after Elisha, Jesus continued the tradition of seeking God first. As busy as he was, the Bible consistently emphasizes Jesus’s practice of going away by himself to pray and get centered before doing his very important work.

Elisha and Jesus modeled patience.

Patience begins with the eternal God. It continues each and every day when we seek our Creator’s will. Sometimes our seeking leads to times of tranquility. I must warn you, however, that making space for patience will also lead to action.

Being patient can mean that we realize that people in places like the Sandtown neighborhood of Baltimore where Freddie Gray grew up or people right here in Bayview-Hunter’s Point have been patient long enough.

Being patient can be terrifying. It can mean that we change jobs or lifestyles or relationships.

Patience is not passive. Sculptor Auguste Rodin is credited with the saying, “Patience is also a form of action.”

God is a sculptor, always shaping us.

May we be open to our Creator’s continued work. Amen.