

Sermon, Proper 9, July 7, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.” (Psalm 30:1-2)

Hidden in the first line of Psalm 30 is an image with several levels of meaning that points to not only how God is our source for life and healing, but reveals much about how God cares for human beings—and all of creation. I learned that when the Psalmist says, “...You have drawn me up...” the sense of the phrase is the drawing up of a bucket of water out of a well. Wells show up with some frequency in Scripture. In a desert culture water is precious. In such an environment wells are central to the wellbeing of communities, not just geographically, but as a sign of God’s providence. It is no wonder that wells have come to represent God’s care for us both physically and spiritually. Jesus said, “...Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

When I was a chaplain intern at Baystate Hospital in Springfield, occasionally a member of the chaplaincy team would offer a teaching or reflection on their understanding of pastoral ministry. One of these offerings came from a lovely older man, originally from Korea, who was also a Presbyterian minister. His topic was the spiritual practice of journaling. It was his way of being in dialogue

with God and listening for God's guidance. He emphasized that this prayer practice worked best when done regularly. This is certainly true of any form of prayer! The image he used was drawing water from a well. He was familiar with how wells worked because, as a child, he had lived in a small village whose main source of water was a well.

His key insight has stayed with me ever since, and was based on something about the function of wells that I had not known before. *It is necessary to draw water from a well on a regular basis.* If this is not done, the water no longer flows as readily out of the ground and can dry up completely. While I believe that God is always ready to offer us "living water," and will meet us more than halfway, shouldn't we do all we can to maintain our inner "wells," keeping them clear of debris, and allowing the healing waters to flow? Perhaps this is what Naaman is being taught in his experience of oblique healing through the wisdom of Elisha.

I think it is quite wonderful how Psalm 30 provides a gloss on the story of the healing of Naaman in 2 Kings, chapter 5. Once again, we are presented with a splendidly human character in the person of Naaman. Today's passage doesn't include the whole saga, so I recommend reading all of chapter 5. Naaman serves the Aramean king as an army commander. He is in "high favor with his master" because he has been victorious in war—not least because it has served God's purposes to make him so.

However, Naaman is afflicted with a skin disease. Serendipitously his wife has a new servant girl who has been captured from the Israelites. This unnamed girl knows of the prophet Elisha, Elijah's protégé, and of Elisha's healing abilities. One could infer from this that, even though still young, she trusts in her God and has faith. Unfortunately Elisha is currently in Samaria. Seemingly not knowing what else to do, Naaman follows formal protocol and speaks to his king. The Aram king decides to write a letter to the king of Israel. Again, everything is done according to the diplomacy of the day. A huge gift of ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments accompanies the letter. It is a testament to how the Aram king regards his commander. He must have genuine compassion for Naaman's illness. Yet there is an element of irony that neither Naaman nor the king feel they can seek Elisha directly.

When the king of Israel receives the letter he is horrified. He has no idea how to heal Naaman! In an act revealing his inadequacy he tears his clothes, saying, "'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.'" The king of Israel feels set up: no good can come from this. Perhaps he feels Naaman is posturing, making a further power play against the Israelites whom he has already defeated. Thankfully word reaches Elisha. He sends the king of Israel a

simple message: "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

I can hear the smile in his words. The situation is not funny. Naaman is suffering with a terrible disease for which I am sure Elisha feels compassion, or he would not have offered to help. Yet I feel Elisha understands that, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17) Extravagant gifts and a procession of horses and chariots are not required. Elisha offers this decidedly uncomplicated means to healing for Naaman: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

Naaman's first response, God bless him, is to be angry and insulted. Surely he has held out great hope that healing would finally come, that he would be restored as a normal member of his community. Perhaps part of him does not really believe healing is possible. What does a young servant girl or a crazy prophet of Israel know, anyway? And what's wrong with my own rivers? Wash seven times in the Jordan? Isn't once enough—especially if Elisha would be willing to wave his hands around, calling on the name of the Lord? Aren't I worth a little extra falderal? Thankfully Naaman has sensible servants who are not fooled by Naaman's rage and see through to his vulnerability. "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'?"

I wonder what Naaman felt and experienced as he entered the Jordan River each time. What did he let go of? What was restored to him? How did the water feel? I think of the spiritual “Michael Row the Boat Ashore.” “Jordan’s river is chilly and cold, hallelujah. Chills the body, but not the soul, hallelujah.” I think it matters that he enters the water seven times. We humans want the immediate—especially in healing. What God wants from us is relationship. Like Naaman we want someone to wave their hands around, do something spectacular. Yet the deep-down, restorative healing God wants for Naaman, for us, often takes time. The act is simple: enter the water, then keep entering the water. Wash, and be clean. Draw from the well so the water keeps flowing. As with Naaman, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

