

Unintended Expectations

by

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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. Naaman brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I 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.

This past week, the pastors and staff had to pack up our offices. If you know anything about my office, you know that might be described as a bit messy. It's filled with things that needed to be sorted— leftover craft projects, papers, toys, books, more books, a few more books. I was ready to get started; powering through the paperwork and the packing so that I would be ready for this move. But just as I started, one task slowed me down. Just behind my computer, there is a collection of post-it notes hanging on the wall. Every time I get a prayer request, or hear about something happening in someone's life, I add a post-it note – just a name, a note, or date. A reminder so that I can keep that person in my prayers, so that when I look up from my computer, from the emails, from the lesson plans, from the work that can occupy my attention, I am reminded of what's really important. This collection of names keeps me grounded. Among those names and prayer requests, there are snippets of prayers I like to come back to. Wise words that help me in difficult times. As I was taking down those post-it notes, afraid of losing even one, I came upon one prayer buried under several layers of notes. It is a prayer written in honor of Oscar Romero and his incredible legacy in El Salvador, in memory of him and in honor of his ministry.

It begins with these words:

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.¹”

¹“Prophets of a Future Not Our Own,” by Bishop Ken Untener, 1979.

As I was reading through that prayer and looking at my stack of prayer requests; I got a little frustrated. I'm ready to see the kingdom now, I'm tired of the long view. I have a timeline in my mind of how fast things should happen, when healing should occur, when pain should be taken away. I have a good idea of exactly how God should be at work in the world. It's probably pretty similar to Naaman's idea: the right proclamation, a few hand waves, and *snap* things are taken care of. As I was reading through that prayer, it caught me. It caught me how often we create these equations and timelines, boxes to be checked off; a kingdom within our control, and how frustrating it is when that kingdom doesn't materialize.

Maybe you share that tendency with me: being guilty of these unintended expectations, guilty of sitting back knowing what *should* happen. It's the moment when you arrive at the theatre—ready for a particular kind of movie, or when you pull up to attraction you've been waiting to see your entire life, and open your eyes, ready to see it for the first time in real time. It's the second after you've been handed the gift but before the paper falls away; we all start to anticipate, dream, imagine; what will be different, what we can expect.

Of course, we've all been on the other side of those unintended expectations: when you've gone above and beyond, sweeping someone off their feet, or when you've gone above and beyond, and yet have somehow missed the mark despite your best attempts. When someone brings a vision that simply can't be met, and you can see the disappointment on their face, when you can see the weight on their shoulders.

That strange rub between the “what is” and the “what I imagined” can be painful, even heartbreaking. We all learn to move past it, but there's a kind of grief that lingers; an imagined memory that you compare reality to. As you move forward there is a danger, a tacit fear, a jaded nihilism, an unspoken bitterness that creeps from the back of our minds speaking into the present, “Remember last time?” “Remember

when it didn't work out..." It's the voice that tells you what you see unfolding in front of you is not enough: not big enough, not good enough, not impressive enough, that something is missing.

How often that voice finds power in our lives. It even finds power here in the 5th chapter of 2nd Kings as well.

I know that once we move into the 1st and 2^{nds} of the Hebrew Scriptures: 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Chronicles, it can be hard to place the individual stories. They can start to run together, lots of apostate kings and unruly prophets.. But to place this story in context... here's the 1 minute synopsis: things have not been great in the land. David's throne was divided during his grandson's rule into two distinct kingdoms: the northern kingdom, Israel, and southern kingdom, Judah. Neither really thrives, both live with the constant threat of invasion and the challenges of the ancient world, plagues, famine, and more. The northern kingdom, Israel, where the story takes place, is ruled by a lackluster king—probably Joram. The chief enemy of the northern kingdom is their neighbor Aram. Arameans, with their chariots and bows, boasted stronger armies and empire designs. Israel was an easy target—and it seems—as verse 1 in our passage shares, that God, the GOD of ISRAEL was giving the famed commander of Aram's army, Naaman, the victory.

It's not good in the land. Famines are punctuated with war—civil and foreign.

Elisha was the prophet of the day. Much like his mentor, Elijah, he was never known for being particularly subtle or politically savvy; he was a prickly sort, but he was known far and wide as a prophet filled with power. He could do the extraordinary: raise the dead, feed the hungry, purify the poisoned. He even had a cool trick with an axe head—but that's a different chapter.

It's a great set up. The first few lines of the story fill us with expectations – the most powerful man in the most powerful army is facing the one thing he can't fight: disease.

The great general is sick. While Hebrew has a number of words to describe every kind of sheep; they only have one word for skin diseases-leprosy. We don't know what the General was suffering from, but it was bad enough that he was *suffering*, bad enough that his household knew about it, that his king wasn't surprised by it.

It's here where the expectations start to fall apart. It's here when a girl, a captive, a child who had been taken and enslaved, heard about the ailment, and with the boldness of youth, says, "I know the answer: the prophet in Samaria." She is NOT the person who should have the answer to Naaman's problems. She is not the person anyone should have listened to. Everything is stacked against her. Naaman has court doctors, magicians and priests at his disposal; a girl serving his wife is *not* the source we should expect; and yet, the conversation between two women becomes the starting place for Naaman's salvation.

Whether it was hubristic pride in her hometown healer, a homesick memory shared in a vulnerable moment, or compassionate concern for the suffering of another, we will never know, but something made that girl speak, and something made Naaman's wife listen; something made Naaman's wife tell her husband who then told the king. We're only five verses in, and on the word of a child, a slave, a foreigner, the king of Aram sends his general into enemy territory with a letter and a fortune. Talk about breaking down expectations.

Biblical scholars are quick to point out that the king of Aram wins on either account: if his favored general goes to Israel to be treated and is killed in the process or leaves unhealed, he had grounds for an invasion (as though he needed one). If his general returns healed, then he regains his general. Win, Win. But what about Naaman? What is he risking? Heading into enemy territory, crossing over the very lands he

had raided, carrying a fortune and a disease that could mean banishment or exile. He treks into the unknown.

When the king of Israel receives this diplomatic correspondence, he knows the politics at play. He knows about Elisha, about the miracles and the oracles; he knows that there is a prophet in Israel, but, that voice in the back of his head was too loud. He knows that he is in a no-win situation: he either fails to produce a miracle cure thus bringing down the wrath of the local super power, or he does and the general that keeps destroying his armies. You see the problem.

While the king is ripping his clothes trying to decide how to move forward, here comes Elisha the prophet to the rescue. Something good is going to happen. Elisha the prophet calls Naaman the General to come be healed and know that there is a prophet in Israel.

Naaman arrives. What happens next? *Nothing*. Elisha doesn't come down, he doesn't even wave from the window. He just sends a servant down with the message "Bathe 7 times in the Jordan river."

When the choir returns next week, we might get to see some good pictures of the Jordan – but as Naaman declares, it's not the Pharpar or the Abana. It's just a river. It's offensive to Naaman. He came all this way, with all this treasure. He knows what Elisha needed to do. Elisha needed to call on God and wave his hands... he knew—it's how it's done, that's how you heal this disease. He is so certain, so clear in his expectations, that he was ready to pack his bags and head home because Elisha proposes something different. I can imagine that scripture left some of the more choice remarks out of the final copy. I can also imagine and understand the rage that filled him.

He's ready to leave. He is ready to walk away from the possibility of wholeness because it doesn't look like what he expected. He's trusted this far, but this last step is too much. Does that feel a little too close to home? Does that sound familiar? Can you see his hands raised, lips pursed, "I'm done." Have you ever caught your own reflection in that

same pose? Have you been in that place when you are willing to walk away from something because it's not what you thought it would be?

It's easy when you've already read verse 14 to shake your head at Naaman's lack of faith. When you're six months removed from a situation or have the benefit of hindsight, we can dismiss at someone's "over reaction." But in that moment, in that incredible moment when you feel like the one thing you've been looking for is lost, who isn't tempted to walk away?

Naaman was expecting something big, but it wasn't. It was just bathing in the Jordan—no incantation, no magic spell, no prophetic utterance, just a bath in a nearby river. That was it.

I get caught when I look out on a world that seems to be turning in a million different directions. When I think about the thousand different worries and fears that keep us awake late into the night. Try to count the 10,000 different issues that could swamp our attention. Global, local, national, personal, you name it. I see weight on people's shoulders, the hurts we're carrying, the question "can it get better" "Is it worth those last few steps." I see Naaman's wisdom, if I just have enough gold and silver; if I can find the right prophet, get the right words, then I can fix this mess. I can go back to what I'm supposed to be doing. I can feel Naaman's frustration, share his desire to throw my hands in the air and say "enough, I'm done." But this story calls me back, this story is a counter to the voices in my head that say, "Impossible," instead it offers instead the gentle question, "why not?"

I don't think there's a simple solution to the problems of our age. In the same way, that Naaman's return to Aram didn't mean that Israel was no longer in danger, that he didn't have to return to the battlefield, that the girl was no longer a captive, that there wouldn't be a famine a few chapters later, that there won't be a relapse. The challenges of the day don't disappear. But, I do know that when we walk away, when we dismiss what we have not yet seen, we miss the opportunity for transformation. We miss the chance to heal and repair one small part of the story.

We tell this story and focus on Naaman and Elisha, but it's really an ensemble piece. All of the characters are critical to the story. The ones I love the most are Naaman's companions. The ones who risk saying "try it." The ones who say, "It's not what you thought, but..."

"If he had given you the impossible, you would have done it."

"Why not? Why not wade into the Jordan?"

After all, this miracle starts with a child's voice and a cherished memory. The it grows in the relationship between husband and wife. It is fleshed out in the politics of the day, but it isn't bound by them. It uses the faith of a foreign and the prophet's vocation. It is completed in the imagination and hope of friends. That's what made the miracle possible: the slow work of God in the people that surrounded him. That's how Naaman was healed. Can we do any less?

The story doesn't say that it wasn't hard, that the path between Damascus and the Jordan isn't long. The story offers hope: that we might be and hear the voices that show us a new way, that offer hope when everything else feels lost.

Now I know that not everyone will make it to the Jordan. As I think through all of those prayer requests, I know that some of them resolved in ways I never could have imagined. Others in ways that bring tears to my eyes today. And some are still unfolding, so tenuous that I hold them gently. I know that it's not easy, but part of the story is being called to take those last steps together, uncertain of the outcome, but willing to make our way together.

The prayer from my wall says it this way, argues that this is what we are called to be about:

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

May those last steps be filled with the voices of those who will encourage you. May the cool waters of the river wash away the hurts and the burdens of the day, and may you find the strength to call another to healing and to wholeness.