

Dark and Murky Waters
2 Kings 5:2-25; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
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I have always had a complicated relationship with creeks and lakes. Having grown up in the mountains of Tennessee I often found myself near a creek or lake, and in the hot summer days (like today) I was always being encouraged to take a swim. My summers were filled with going to a particular spot called “the Blue Hole” which was a popular swimming hole that my friends and family loved visiting, but I always had a bit of distrust of water I couldn’t see through. If I didn’t know what was in the water, I had a hard time getting in for a swim. I would just prefer to sit in the heat of the sun. I was typically the person in the group that smiled and sat on the rocks while I watched my friends swim in the blue hole. My fear of the murky waters was only confirmed after encountering a water moccasin on several occasions. And so still to this day- I’m not a fan of swimming in any sort of murky water. So, I felt a bit challenged by our Old Testament reading from the book of 2 Kings which tells us the story of a man named Namaan who is healed through the murky waters of the Jordan River.

To understand this story I need to tell you a bit about the context of the story. 1 and 2nd Kings is appropriately named because these books tell the stories of the kings who ruled after King David. And for the most part the kings are a disappointment. The majority of kings after King David were not faithful to God and allowed the worship of other Gods throughout the land. Along with their idolatry, there was also civil unrest and political conflict which eventually led to a civil war and the one united kingdom ended up splitting into two separate Kingdoms. The kingdom of Judah is in the south and the kingdom of Israel is in the north, and the two books of Kings tell the stories of kings from both kingdoms.

Along with telling us about the kings of Israel the two books of Kings also introduces the reader to the role of the prophet. In ancient Israel and Judah prophets were not future tellers, but rather the prophet was a person who spoke on behalf of God and would hold kings and the people accountable to their covenant with God. The Prophets would call out sin, and idolatry, and injustice and they would keep the kings accountable for their actions. As you might imagine based on the unfolding lack of commitment to God and God’s covenant Prophets and Kings had a sort of tense relationship.

The Two main prophets we read about in Kings is Elijah and Elisha. I often call these two the Rockstars of the Bible. Both Elijah and Elisha are bold and intense and there is an abundance of stories with fiery showdowns with other God’s (The God of Israel always prevails) and there are stories of many different sorts of miracles taking place. A few chapters before our story today Elijah passes his ministry on to Elisha and is then taken to heaven in fiery

Chariot. You know dying in one's bed was not good enough for a man of Elijah's stature background.

And so all of this is the background and context for today's story. We are in the northern Kingdom of Israel. Both the King and Kingdom are not following God's laws or remaining faithful to their covenant with God and Israel has been at war with a neighboring country of Aram. Currently in this particular story the kingdoms of Israel and Aram are not fighting, but the peace is tenuous and any small thing could start the fighting again. And with all of that in mind we are introduced to a man named Naaman who is a commander in the Aramean Army. Namaan is an enemy of Israel.

Naaman, in short, commands the forces that have brought violence, loss of life, homes, and livelihood, and untold suffering to the people of Israel. Naaman is an individual who, we may assume, is feared and hated by the Israelite people. Namaan is a man of considerable esteem, a victorious and heroic soldier, and a leper. (Working Preacher Commentary¹)

The term Leper is most likely a more general term for skin disorder, but in an honor shame culture of his day this sort of skin disease would have big consequences for him with the potential to cause him to be exiled and shunned from his community.

In Namaan's household is a young unnamed Israelite girl who was enslaved after one of Naaman's military expeditions. While serving Namaan's wife she says "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." I will come back to this point later, but it is important to take note in this story who is in the know and who is not, but I think it is a miracle that this young girl was willing to testify to God's healing powers to this man who has enslaved her.

And also miraculously, Namaan takes the young girl's advice to seek out Elisha. He travels into an enemy territory to be healed by a prophet of a different God than who he worships. Maybe Namaan is just that desperate to find a cure or maybe he has heard of Elijah and Elisha's rockstar status and the miracles they have accomplished. Namaan does not go empty handed (unlike Jesus' followers in our Gospel text today) Namaan brings a whole entourage with him to carry all the stuff he is bringing. He brings a whole bunch of money (silver and gold) and 10 sets of clothing which we are to assume will be gifted to anyone who is able to heal him from his leprosy.

When Namaan arrives in Israel, he first goes to the king of Israel and presents his request... and the king of Israel is immediately stressed out. And we are told that he rips his clothing (which is a sign of lament). The King is stunned and perplexed thinking that if Namaan isn't healed he will use this as a reason to begin another war.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-14-3/commentary-on-2-kings-51-14-8>

But when Elisha hears of Naaman's request, he sends word to have Naaman come to his home. Naaman goes to Elisha's home, but when he arrives a messenger meets Naaman at the gate and instructs Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan river 7 times. Elisha is so confident that he doesn't even come outside to meet Naaman; he sends a messenger with simple instruction.

Naaman is outraged. He is angered that Elisha doesn't meet with him and he is disgusted by his recommendation to wash in the river. Naaman expected a personal meeting with Elisha. Naaman says "I wanted him to wave his hand over me and do something miraculous, not send me to swim in a dirty river. Naaman had expectations of how his healing was supposed to go. Naaman says I could have just washed in my own rivers which are much nicer than this gross Jordan River.

When I was in college I got to go on trip to the country of Jordan and while there we went to the Jordan River. And based on my story earlier it was not water that I was excited to swim in. The waters of the Jordan river were quite murky. I too would be upset if someone had told me to jump into that river 7 times.

However, Creation and healing out of the Dark and Murky waters is a theme throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis chapter one we are told that God's Spirit hovered over the dark chaotic waters from which all creation came. God Parted the Red Sea for the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. When the Israelites enter the promise land God reversed the flow of the Jordan river so that the people could easily walk across the river. Before Elijah was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan river together. And eventually many years later Jesus will be baptized in the dark and murky waters of the Jordan River inviting us all to die to ourselves and be resurrected into a new life in the kingdom of God. Creation and Healing is an experience of traveling through the dark and murky waters. For Elisha to recommend The Jordan river Elisha is sending Naaman to a sacred place a place in which God's presence has been encountered by many, many people.

As most of you know, last week I had the wonderful privilege of leading our church's summer mission Project to Wise County, Virginia where we partnered with the Appalachia Service Project. Our mission was to help four different families with different home repairs. Two teams helped build wheelchair ramps, and two teams helped with indoor home repairs, specifically helping with flooring and foundation repairs. One team in particular, the purple team, whose members were Lindsay Trout, Paul Orlando, Forrest Goetke, Fiona Fuller, and Henry Foster, had a sort of baptism last week in the dark and murky waters of Appalachia. Lindsay spoke briefly about this last week, but the purple team was having to do a bunch of work in a muddy foundation of a house, and one night after a rainstorm a pipe broke filling the crawl space with flood water. It took some trust in God to step by faith into those dark and murky waters.

Our time last week in Appalachia took me back to two important summers in my life. I spent the summers of 2008 and 2009 coordinating a mission site (for an organization called

Youth Works). It was very similar to Appalachian Service Project. Folks would come for a one week mission trip where they would assist folks with house repairs. In 2008 and 2009 I was in Seminary. And I had hit a sort of rough patch in my faith walk. Often when folks think of people in seminary you imagine it has this very spiritual time full of prayer and feeling close to God reading your Bible and feeling God's presence with you as you learn theology, but in truth Seminary is more like an excavation of one's faith. In every class and every step you are asked to take a real hard look at all the things and ideas you have spent your life believing in. And sometimes the excavation extends to your foundation and you hit rock or a pipe bursts and the foundation begins to crumble, things you thought you knew for sure start to get murky. And so in 2008 that is where I was. I had more questions than answers. I was lost in my own head trying to figure out what it was I thought about God and who I was in God's world. Frankly I didn't know what it meant to be a follower of Christ. And I was lost. Crawford is here today and he remembers me during that time. He calls it my emo era because I had dyed my hair black.

And so I was having a crisis of faith. And I was faced with a summer with nothing to do and a close friend recommended that I apply to work for Youthworks, which I decided to do because I would make money while doing it and it sounded like an adventure. Youthworks has sites all over the country; they have rural sites and urban sites, and in my interview with the organization they asked if I had any preferences and I said I was pretty much up for anything but I would prefer to not be in the south, and not be at a rural site. So naturally the next week when I got my assignment I was informed that they were sending me to Delbarton West Virginia, a Southern Coal Mining Town with a population of about 400 people. In hindsight I don't know why I didn't quit immediately. I, like Naaman, in our story was enraged. I had certain expectations that were not being met. This was the opposite of the adventure I was hoping for.

I have a little more backstory to confess to. I told the folks on the trip last week that I am a child of Appalachia. I am the grand-daughter of coal miners, and both of my parents were born within 20 miles of the ASP site we were at last week. I did not grow up in Appalachia (for many reasons but one reason is that my grandfather developed black lung from the coal mines and had to move his family to Dayton Ohio because he could no longer work in a coal mine) but culturally Appalachia is home to me. The food, the sayings, the orientation to the world at my core is Appalachian. But in 2008 when I was assigned a summer to live in Delbarton WV I was living with a sense of shame about my Appalachian roots. It was something that I hid from and didn't like to admit it to folks. I intentionally tried (successfully) to lose my southern accent. I did not want to be associated with any of the stereotypes that are often associated with folks who are Appalachian. And so when I got my assignment to head off to Delbarton West Virginia- I was being sent home in a way, a home that I wanted to avoid, but also a home I needed to make peace with. I was being asked by God to go to a significant place and see what God had in store for me. God was telling me to trust God's Healing and New creation. But I was going to have to walk through the dark and Murky Waters.

In the midst of Naaman's outrage, his servants have the courage to go to him and basically say Maybe you "should try it" what do you have to lose? Again Please note who in this

story has understanding. Namaan would be nowhere if he had not listened to the slaves of his household. and so Namaan acquiesce.

Namaan dips himself 7 times into the Jordan river, just as he was told to and we as readers are left to our own imagination on how the healing happens. Did he count, did he get out and back in, did nothing happen until the 7th time, or were there small changes with each dip? We don't get these details, but what we do know is that by the 7th dip in the water, Namaan is restored. The text says his skin is like that of a young boy.

Not only his Namaan's skin transformed, but so is Namaan's soul. He returns to Elisha and testifies saying "Now I know there is no God in all of the world except Israel." This is a profound statement in Namaan's context. He is converting to the worship of a new God but this is also changing his allegiance to his country for there was not separation of worship and state in these days. Namaan begs and pleads with Elisha to take the money and clothes he brought for his healer, but Elisha will not accept the gift- Elisha stubbornly tells him I didn't heal you, God did.

So Namaan then decides to take as much dirt from the Jordan River as two mules can carry. This dirt is to create an altar so he can worship the God of Israel when he returns home and so he can remember the sacredness of the place where he was transformed.

After my first summer in Delbarton West Virginia I returned home having been healed. I came home with my regular shade of hair color. And my heart had been restored and reconnected to God. I made peace with who I am and where I am from. I stopped feeling ashamed and began feeling proud of my heritage. I learned about the systemic injustice that has plagued Appalachia and I mourned that I did not know my cultural home as a child. The people who call Delbarton home, helped to show me what it meant to serve God and to love my neighbor. In the misty Appalachian mountains I made peace with the fact that all my questions might not ever be answered. But I didn't need answers to feel God's presence; Instead I learned what it felt like to serve God with my heart. And it was the people and friends I made in Appalachia that helped me learn. The people I had ignored or avoided were in fact the very prophets calling me back home to God.

I'm still not a huge fan of swimming in waters that I can't see through- give me a clean pool any day :)! But I'm more open to the metaphorical dark and murky waters that God is calling us to... Faith, healing, restoration, new birth, enemies becoming friends.... Are all possible when we allow ourselves to trust in God who calls us into the unknown- sometimes we are called to go to places we are not sure of... just because we can't see to the other side does not mean that God is not present... in fact God might be using these very waters to bring about healing in our lives or new creation into being. Tomorrow we our country is celebrating The 4th of July... and because of recent political unrest- and huge changes being made by the Supreme Court- the holiday this year has a bit of dissonance to it- it certainly feels that we are all standing at the edge of the dark and murky waters of unknown future- but I believe that we are not alone... and that God can create and bring new life when we don't think it is possible.

We must be open to the people God places in our lives who point to God's truth... twice in this story it was Namaan's slaves that helped him find his way. These are people he thought so lowly of that he owned them... and yet, they were in fact the people who were able to lead him to healing. There are two kings in this story- kings with wealth, power, and armies and neither of them had any clue or ability to help Namaan... rather it was a young girl who had been stolen away from her country and family that led Namaan to God. So may this story be a reminder to all of us not to discount anyone- the very people we overlook just might be God's messenger sent to show us the way to God.

Finally, let us not discount anyone as unable to be healed and transformed by God. Namaan is not a good guy- he was an enemy of Israel, he captured and enslaved the Israelites, and he is highly reactive when he doesn't get his way and yet he has an encounter with the one true God and is changed and reformed. There is no one who cannot be transformed by God's grace and mercy and redemption and let us all be about the work of sharing this Good news with all whom we encounter.

Let us Pray:

God Life is often complicated... and you call us into the liminal space of the unknown... help us to navigate the unknown waters... to have the courage to face the unknown and discover your new creation. In your name we pray, Amen.