

2 Kings 5:1\_14 The Message + Common English Version

5 1\_3 Naaman was general of the army under the king of Aram. He was important to his master, who held him in the highest esteem because it was through his efforts that God had given victory to Aram. He was a truly great man, but he was also afflicted with a grievous skin disease - leprosy. On an Aramean raiding expedition against Israel, a young girl was captured and became a maid to Naaman's wife. One day she said to her mistress, "If only my master could meet the prophet of Samaria, he would be healed of his skin disease."

4 Naaman went straight to his master and reported what the girl from Israel had said.

5 "Well then, go," said the king of Aram. "And I'll send a letter of introduction to the king of Israel."

So Naaman headed off, taking with him about 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothes. 6 He delivered the letter to the king of Israel. The letter read, "When you get this letter, you'll know that I've personally sent my servant Naaman to you; so you can heal him of his skin disease."

7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he was terribly upset, ripping his robe to pieces. He said, "Am I a god with the power to bring death or life that I get orders to heal this man from his disease? What's going on here? That king's trying to pick a fight with me."

8 Elisha the man of God heard what had happened, and that the king of Israel was so distressed that he'd ripped his robe to shreds. He sent word to the king, "Why are you so upset, ripping your robe like this? Send him to me so he'll realize that there's a prophet in Israel."

9 So Naaman with his horses and chariots arrived in style and stopped at Elisha's door.

10 Elisha sent out a servant to meet him with this message: "Go to the River Jordan and immerse yourself seven times. Your skin will be healed and you'll be as good as new."

11\_12 Naaman lost his temper. He turned on his heel saying, "I thought he'd personally come out and meet me, call on the name of God, wave his hand over the diseased spot, and get rid of the disease. The Damascus rivers, Abana and Pharpar, are far cleaner than any of the rivers in Israel. Why not bathe in them? I'd at least get clean." He left in anger.

13 But Naaman's servants caught up with him and said, "Father, if the prophet had asked you to do something hard and heroic, wouldn't you have done it? So why not this simple command 'wash and be clean?'"

14 Humbled, Naaman did it. He went down to the river and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, just as the Holy Man had asked. His skin was healed; and it was like the skin of a young boy. He was made clean and as good as new.

Christina Baldwin in her book The Seven Whispers: Listening to the Voice of Spirit, has identified seven spiritual practices that can help us deepen our personal spirituality. I'm going to read each of these practices slowly and let them seep in to our hearts:

Maintain peace of mind

Move at the pace of guidance

Practice certainty of purpose

Surrender to surprise

Ask for what you need and offer what you can

Love the folks in front of you

Return to the world

Of course, these practices and others that can help us gain greater spiritual depth, are much easier said than done. But we nevertheless hear the wisdom here. This summer we are listening to the ancient prophets who offer insights that can help us more fully embody our personal spirituality and strengthen our commitments to social responsibility. When I first read this morning's scripture, and Elisha's simple instruction, "Get in the water," I was reminded of one of Christina's whispers which often resonates with me and helps to calm my busy-ness and distraction and bring me into the present - "Move at the Pace of Guidance." She describes...

In a world of speed and distraction, pace of guidance invites us to combine the practices of measured movement and listening. Speed is some guy running through the airport shouting into a cell phone. Pace is going around the block with a three year old and noticing everything the child is noticing. When we move at pace, we have time to question and time to listen for answers before moving on. When we move at the pace of guidance, it occurs to us to wonder what plans the Divine might have for us, in the midst of the plans we have for ourselves.

Speed tends to cancel out guidance... [as we become] out of touch with spirit...and Personal will can run rampant....The pace of guidance, like peace of mind, begins internally. Even though all my conditioning teaches me to accommodate speed, I am responsible for the *pace* I bring

to the moment, just as I am responsible for the *peace* I bring to the moment.

Naaman was sorely in need of healing. His pace of life seemed full speed, and he had been able to accomplish many things. He was in very good standing with the king, nevertheless, his illness made him less than whole. Leprosy is a very debilitating, and crippling disease. Though he had been a great warrior, this disease if untreated could very likely isolate him from others. He was also plagued with arrogance. Some say that sin is separation from God, and his own arrogance could do just that, separate him from God and other people. Possibly because he was so limited by the increasing symptoms of his disease, he became willing to listen and to go to any lengths to be healed... But, he needed to be humbled first by those around him so he could really listen and hear the simple wisdom of Elisha's request..... "Go to the River!"

I confess. Sometimes I am Naaman. Let me invite you inside my head. I am a teacher. I am the big sister. I am a mother. I am a strong woman. I have accomplished some things in my life. And now you want to tell me what to do? I know what is best in this situation. I've been through this before. Come on! Give me the respect I deserve! Have you ever felt like this? Now, thankfully, when I am feeling this way, this reaction is usually inside my head. And as an imperfect human, some have seen this arrogance slip out....family members especially, in some work situations. Just a little.... Those are not my most proud moments. When this happens, I am speeding along. I am certainly not moving at the pace of guidance.

Last month I spent three weeks with my sister who was recovering from surgery. We generally get along very well. But, we have not spent that much concentrated and intense timetogether since we were kids. I was on 24/7 initially. And I admit there were a few times when I was exhausted and at least a little overwhelmed by her needs. I mostly kept these feelings to myself. But at least one time, I blurted out something in frustration. Thankfully, I recognized it, and apologized immediately. And from then on, I remembered when these understandable, human feelings were bubbling up, I knew I needed to take some time to breathe, to walk, to get out in nature and let the

pace of guidance refuel me for service.

Most of us, even the true saints among us, have been caught off guard like this... Have gotten overwhelmed with the tasks at hand and the demands for “Right now!!” And then maybe someone got in our way or tried to tell us what to do..... and even though we knew better... we snapped.

In my better moments, in those times when I am awake and present, there is wisdom within me.... within each of us. Even though we have momentary lapses, when we pause to think about it, we often have a sense of the right action, the better wzy, a healthier response in a challenging time. When we can remember to pause, the voice of holy guidance is there offering us insight and direction. God has been present all along. We are the ones who stray. We are the ones who react instead of listening and letting God lead us.

“Get in the water!!”

At the core of this is a spiritual practice that is often neglected, and yet essential to our well being. Yes, we often ignore our own needs and put ourselves last on our list. Spirit is always calling us to self care.... genuine care for ourselves and our needs. The lowly servant girl knew this. Naaman probably knew too, but seemed to be looking for a quick fix. What ultimately healed Naaman was about paying attention and listening, and then following directions for self care, not just one soak in the river, but seven times.

“Naaman, get in the water, already!!”

Ultimately holy practice of self care is about listening.... Listening to that still small voice within, being truly present. Listening is vital in our relationship, and we must also listen as a church, collective listening as we seek clarity for our next steps, for how God is calling us forward. Are we listening? We can't move at the pace of guidance unless we first pause and listen.

Our California Nevada Annual Conference has been leading the way with a commitment to holy listening as we learn together what it means to practice holy conferencing. Along with searching the Scriptures, fasting, prayer, Communion and service to others, John Wesley believed that holy conferencing is an essential practice that helps people experience God's grace. Bishop Sally Dyck of the Northern Illinois Conference has said, "in our speech and our actions and our relationships, we're looking for a more excellent way in ... how we treat each other." Another way holy conferencing has been described is "*becoming of one heart, even when we are not all of one mind.*" (REPEAT)

I have been attending our annual conference for 6-8 years now. And I have seen the impact of our listening. The earlier conferences I attended had more conflict. People were voicing their views, and I'm pretty sure, they didn't always feel listened to. It felt like a wide divide between "them" and "us." In more recent years, including this year, we are demonstrating deeper listening. We had presentations and worship that helped us to get in touch with our collective need for repentance toward the Native peoples in our regions, for past and present acts of brutality, ignorance, and disregard. We have also been moving toward being a truly inclusive conference for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. This year, three LGBTQ clergy were ordained. We also sent a very diverse group of delegates to the General Conference who stood up, raised their voices, and advocated for full inclusion within our world-wide church. Though some feel discouraged, many are still committed to Holy Conferencing and giving all a chance to be heard, with a hope that our church can become a model of full inclusion, as guided by Jesus who taught us that we are ALL children of God. And we are called to love one another.

One of my spiritual teachers and guides is the poet, Mary Oliver. She has always helped me to pause and slow down and listen.... offering holy guidance. Like her, I am humbled by time in nature. Hear her poem

When I am among the trees  
by Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust,  
equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you, too, have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine."

"It's simple."

"Stay a while"

"Naaman, Get in the water!"

Pause, listen, trust.... and move at the pace of this guidance. "Naaman, you can be healed. Get in the water!" Glo, you can be healed and guided to right action. Church, listen. God is shining a light on the path. Go down to the river, and let the holy water heal you and make you whole.