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Quotes from Barbara Crafton in  
*The Christian Century*, February 8, 2003

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY  
February 12, 2006

2 Kings 5:1-14  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27  
Mark 1:40-45

## 2 Kings 5:1-14

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>He 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." <sup>7</sup>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."

<sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>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! <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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'?" <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."

## Mark 1:40-45

<sup>40</sup>A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." <sup>41</sup>Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "**do choose. Be made clean!**" <sup>42</sup>Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. <sup>43</sup>After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, <sup>44</sup>saying to him, "**See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.**" <sup>45</sup>But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

These two stories are read together this morning because they are both about healing. In both cases a man of God heals someone of leprosy. In the Old Testament lesson from 2 Kings a Syrian general named Naaman had the disease and a slave girl who had been kidnapped from Israel suggested he go to Elisha who lived back in her home country. Naaman did and he was healed. In the Gospel of Mark we read that, about nine hundred years after Naaman's healing, an unnamed leper went to Jesus with the same request. He, too, was healed.

There is an odd reticence about the healings in these stories. There is an expectation of spectacular pyrotechnics. That expectation is followed by a matter-of-factness in the healings that seems to disappoint. Elisha sent word to General Naaman to go wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is frankly offended by the simplicity of Elisha's prescription for curing his leprosy. He said, "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!"

But nothing that glamorous is planned. Naaman should just go and wash himself in the river. It looked to Naaman like he'd come a long way for nothing. He thought – "The river! As if I hadn't tried washing before. As if the Jordan is a better river than the ones we have at home."

Naaman is like the man in the old joke who is caught in a flood and goes up on the roof, where he intends to wait for God to rescue him. Person after person comes by in a rowboat, offering to take him to safety. "No, thanks", he says while the waters continue to rise. "I know God is going to save me." Finally the water rises above the roof and the man drowns. When he gets to heaven he demands an explanation. "I prayed and prayed but you didn't save me!" God answers "I sent four rowboats and you didn't get into any of them."

**We don't claim the healings that come to us.** Instead, we set the evidentiary bar so high for a miracle of healing that a dozen miracles happen to us and we don't notice any of them. It seems that a miracle has to be magic and have a lot of special effects before we pay any attention. But most of the miracles we know are like rowboats. They come along regularly, but you have to get into them to get the full effect. When it comes to miracles, we are snobbish.

Who is it, after all, who recommends that Naaman go down to the river to wash as the holy man told him to do? His servants. Who persuades him to seek out Elisha in the first place? A slave girl. People without pretensions. People who have little to lose by looking foolish. People who know they don't count for much in the way the world values people.

There aren't special miracles for "important people". They don't heal differently from poor people, servants, or anybody else. People who need healing are nothing more nor less than our brothers and sisters in Christ. The unimportant go first in this kingdom, leading the way for the rest. With the miracles of God, the hierarchy of privilege is gone. Blessings come tumbling upon everyone.

The reluctance to claim miracles is still in force as we check in on Jesus and the leper some nine hundred years after Naaman was cleansed. In the Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus himself seems shy about curing the man. Jesus commands, "See that you say nothing to anyone..." But the man disobeys and soon Jesus is on the run, hiding from the crowds. He draws back from the display of his power, even though his miracles are performed to show people that the kingdom is near.

Bible scholars have always argued about why Jesus told people to be quiet about the miracles he performed. I have wondered if it is because people are not ready. Did they need to live through the weakness and despair of the end of Jesus' story on earth before they could be trusted with the fullness of his power? Perhaps they need to know the darkness before they can handle the light. It is the same thing with Christians today. Would we stick around to hear the whole story of who Jesus is and about the life we must live as disciples – if healing miracles were a common occurrence. Isn't it likely we would just pick up our miracle and go home?

Even those closest to Jesus sometimes resembled General Naaman – disdaining the Jordan River. They had a hard time with the *ordinariness* of Jesus. With his humiliation at the hands of powerful, corrupt authorities. Jesus' followers all agreed that he was the Christ – but he didn't straighten everybody out. The general feeling was that he ought to show his power more clearly. He ought to demonstrate who he was. His enemies taunted him, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself and us and come down from the cross." His friends agreed. They thought Jesus should have done just that.

But would "showing" them his power have made a difference in Jesus' ministry? To claim a healing, a miracle, does not erase our humanity. The Jesus who miraculously healed people was also a person, which is a dangerously weak thing to be. People are weak enough to die – and Jesus did. We live with Jesus who is God and human. Our faith and the experience of our lives both make us who we are. We can see God at work in the way our faith and the experience of our lives influence each other.

Happy endings and solved problems do not certify the power of God except to those who read the story of humanity by the light of their faith. Believers are already disposed to see God's power at work. For the others, to those who were alive when he walked the earth but who didn't claim the faith, Jesus' life must have looked like a failure. So many must have stood at the foot of the cross and asked, "Is that all? He seemed so promising. He seemed so powerful. All of that has been destroyed, crucified. I'm glad I wasn't foolish enough to believe. Think how embarrassed I would be now."

We see the power of God because we claim it. In a sense, we see the power of God because we decide to see God at work. Yes, it's just the Jordan River, and we could dismiss it as ordinary. Except we know that is where God has told us to go and be cleansed. Someone heals spontaneously, or survives a difficult surgery, and sees a miracle. A person who was lonely finds happiness and thanks God for it. A world on the brink of war finds a reason to hope for peace and sees the love of the creator.

Someone dies on a cross and the world sees failure and turns away. Others, however, glimpse eternal life. They realize that they have a say in what they will accept and who they follow.

Like them, we are not compelled by evidence. We are invited by faith.

The Jordan River was an ordinary place to do an ordinary thing – but when the ordinary is done at the command of God miracles happen.

Your life is made up of ordinary things you see everyday. How will you make those ordinary things part of your faith? How will you spend your time? What will you say to members of your family? What will you try to learn? How will you spend your money? What will you pray for?

God has given you an ordinary life. He has miracles planned for it.