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" [I]f the prophet had commanded you to do something *difficult*, would you not have done it? "



It is, I suppose, the unspoken desire of every preacher that her or his sermons be pondered and remembered—maybe for a couple of days ... or at least until Sunday lunchtime (!). I'd guess that, over my lifetime thus far, I've heard close to 17 or 18 hundred sermons, and if I'm totally candid: Other than the one I hear David Niven preach every Christmas in *The Bishop's Wife*, I can't recall almost any of them. But I will always—always!—remember the sermon when I first met Naaman, the mighty warrior.

David, our Presbyterian pastor at the time, was preaching a summer series on the lesser-known heroes of the Bible, and his sermon exploring the story of Naaman just *riveted* me. Naaman, the great and victorious Aramean (or Syrian) warrior, is afflicted with a serious skin disease. (What Scripture refers to as "leprosy" was not what we today call Hansen's disease.) He receives a medical referral from his wife's Israelite serving girl; obtains a letter of introduction and a wagon-load of gifts from the Aramean king; and sets off for dusty, lowly Israel, to be cured.

But then, Naaman the mighty trips over his own ego. He takes offense that the great prophet Elisha does not come out to greet him personally; and he's incensed that rather than curing him by invoking God and laying hands upon him, Elisha sends him on what seems a fool's errand: "Go dunk yourself in the Jordan River, seven times." Fortunately, Naaman's servants convince him to heed Elisha's prescription. And when Naaman finally deigns to wash in the Jordan, his skin completely clears. But far more transformationally, in the Gentile Naaman is born faith in Israel's God Yahweh, Whom Naaman will now worship forever.

And then Pastor David came to his point: It was Naaman's *pride* that had very nearly blinded him to God's grace and promise. A venerated general in his own land and a *VVIP* in his own mind, Naaman couldn't believe that God, through the prophet Elisha, would assign him a task so ordinary ... so humble ... so *common*. "Hey, listen! I'm a big, important person, and I do only big, important things!" And it was about here, in David's sermon, that I lost it.

It was the summer of 2002 (before Jim and I had even met), and I was in the earliest throes of what, as I've shared before, was a very, very, *very* long discernment process for the priesthood. Now, within the previous six months, I'd gotten an important promotion at work; bought my first house; and was, for the first time in my life, finally fully 'out' to everyone I knew. I was on my way to my own **big, important** things. So, why was God pestering me about ordained ministry? How could *that* possibly be God's plan for me?

And yet, **l** as I heard David describe Naaman's pride ... his insistence that he merited something grander and loftier than a dip in a river ... I broke down in tears. And not just muffled, stifled sniffs and a quick wipe of a tissue, like during a sad movie: No, big, choking sobs and *rivers* of tears pouring down my face. Try though I may—for I was sitting way down front, only a few pews away from the pulpit—I *couldn't stop* crying. Finally, I had to leave the nave and go to the men's room, to pull myself together.

And as I stood there in that little restroom, staring at myself in the mirror, suddenly, I *knew*. ↓ Like Naaman, I *knew* God was blessing me with a *good thing*. Like Naaman, I *knew* a certain prophet in my own life<sup>1</sup> had spoken God's truth to me. Like Naaman, I *knew* God had set a common, humble task before me. And like Naaman, I *knew* that if, sooner or later, I didn't take it up, I'd miss the 'extra helping' of grace and the Spirit that God was offering me, ↓ if I was willing to surrender my will to God's.

I left the tiny corner washroom at Nassau Presbyterian Church that August Sunday twenty years ago knowing that *some day ... some way* or another ... I'd serve God and God's people as an ordained minister.<sup>2</sup> And I had Naaman the mighty warrior<sup>3</sup> to thank. For he finally got me to see that the ordinariness of the task God had given me wasn't a reflection of my worth in God's eyes ... but, instead, was a simple and direct invitation for me to *be drawn more deeply into God's holiness*: the holiness God longs to share with *all* of God's creatures—even Naaman ... and even with me.

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God *knows* that we get all wrapped up in ourselves: our busy-ness and our pride; our dreaming and our delaying. Therefore, God keeps the invitation simple and direct, so when we, like Naaman, finally stop sputtering and evading ... we can take up the common, humble task God calls us to that will renew our faith and refresh our spirit.<sup>4</sup>

And so, on this 'Naaman Day,' I ask you—each one of you—to ponder: What ordinary river is God calling you to dunk *yourself* in? What common, humble task is God setting before *you*, to draw you more deeply into God's holiness?

- Perhaps it is a task of serving others: feeding the hungry at a soup kitchen or soothing the suffering at a women's shelter; assisting the needy by volunteering at a Goodwill center, a thrift shop or a literacy program; relieving the crushing loneliness and despair of isolation, by visiting or taking out someone who is homebound.
- Or perhaps it is a spiritual discipline: reading a chapter of the Bible or a daily devotional, each day, as a regular encounter with God; praying the Daily Office; or setting aside fifteen or thirty minutes a day to pray or journal or just be still ... and listen for the Lord.
- Or perhaps it is the work of reconciliation: undertaking to repair a long-ago rupture with a friend or family member; seeking forgiveness for pain that you now repent of having caused; or working to make God's justice and peace a reality for those who so desperately need them.

The particulars are for you, alone, to discern. But the message I bring you today ... the message blessed Naaman brought me some twenty years ago, now ... is this: God *is* calling *you*, to

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<sup>1</sup> Her name was Holly.

<sup>2</sup> It would take me another dozen or so years to begin the formal process toward ordination. I was not as quick (or as decisive) on the uptake as the mighty Naaman!

<sup>3</sup> Well, really, the Rev David Davis' *explication* of Naaman's story.

<sup>4</sup> I don't mean to imply (or, worse, to seem to be humble-bragging) that the pathway to ordination is simple or common. It may well be the greatest gift of God's grace I'll ever receive, other than my baptism. Rather, I'm pointing to the shedding of ego and (self-)sophistication that I, like Naaman, needed to go through in order to partake in the grace God was offering me. God did not create me to be a corporate bigwig ... a globe-trotting executive; the measure of job titles or compensation, far from being the 'fate' God had 'destined' for me, was, in fact, a disabler—a distraction—that I needed to let God help me overcome (and put down).

*something*. Not something flashy and grand. Not something complicated and onerous. Probably not something you're expecting—but something that will draw you more fully and deeply into the holiness of God: a simple dip in an ordinary river ... that will change the course of your faith, forever.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington  
St Andrew's Parish  
Kent, CT*