



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Traveling Light”

2 Kings 5:1-16

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You can tell a lot about a person by how they pack for a trip. How do you like to travel? Roller bag? Duffel? Backpack? I take a ridiculous amount of pride in packing light. Here’s what Rick Steves, travel writer, television host, tour operator and all around travel guru has to say about this topic:

On your trip you’ll meet two kinds of travelers: those who pack light and those who wish they had... The importance of packing light cannot be overemphasized... You’ll never meet a traveler who, after five trips, brags: “Every year I pack heavier.” The measure of a good traveler is how light he or she travels.<sup>1</sup>

Naaman does not pack light. Our reading tells us that when he travels, he takes servants and chariots and horses and lots of money and lots of clothes, ten sets of garments. He has his reasons. An army commander, he needs to dress in a manner befitting a man of power and prestige. He takes a lot of time planning what to wear in the hopes that his clothes might distract people from his condition. Naaman has leprosy, a chronic disease that is disfiguring and debilitating.

News of a possible cure comes from an unexpected source: a Hebrew slave girl captured in battle. She speaks of an Israelite prophet who can heal such ailments.

That is enough information for Naaman to pack his many bags. He has tried everything in Aram, been to every doctor, checked into every clinic, taken every pill, applied every ointment. In his search for a cure from leprosy, he has explored the unconventional, the unorthodox, and the unproven. He has tried acupuncture, therapeutic touch, aromatherapy, and reflexology. Consulting a prophet in a foreign land isn’t much of a stretch for Naaman.

Naaman knows how the world works and he knows how to get things done. He loads up his chariots with riches—750 pounds of silver and 150 pounds of gold—so that he can pay for what might prove to be an expensive cure. He has his king write a letter to the king of Israel—top man to top man. Surely, the king of Israel can arrange for the healing of such an important person as Naaman.

When he receives the letter, the king of Israel is aghast. Here is the leader of the army that has defeated him demanding a miracle that the king cannot produce. Fortunately, Elisha the prophet hears of his plight. *Have Naaman come see me*, he tells the king.

So Naaman repacks his many bags, leaves the palace and journeys to Elisha’s home. He parks all of his chariots and horses and servants in the front yard and waits for the prophet to come out and greet him in a manner

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ricksteves.com/travel-tips/packing-light/packing-smart>

befitting a man of his stature. As he waits, he wonders how healing will take place—what mighty acts will be performed, what grand and glorious words will be spoken.

A messenger comes out of the house and says, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and you will be healed.”

Naaman is furious. How can this small-time two-bit prophet snub him in this way? Not to come out in person is bad enough. But to tell him to take a bath in the Jordan, which everyone knows is a puny excuse of a river? (Think the Olentangy.) This is an insult of the highest order.

What if someone sees him there? What will happen to his reputation? He is prepared to do a great and fearsome task—run to the top of a mountain, slay a giant, make a large donation of cash. But he is unprepared to do something that will make him look foolish. It’s bad enough he has leprosy. Now this?

For Naaman to bathe in the Jordan, he has to take off his fine robes and costly garments, take off his vest covered in medals won in battle... take all of that off, leave it on the bank and enter the water naked, alone, vulnerable. For this cure to work, he has to travel light.

Naaman weighs his options. *On one hand is my dignity, my position in the world, my reputation. On the other hand, there is a slim possibility of healing.* Naaman is my hero... because he goes with the slim possibility. He doesn’t do it gracefully. But he does it. Seven times, he washes in the Jordan. And, he is healed of his skin ailment.

Now you would think that we would all be eager to follow Naaman’s example and do whatever is needed in order to make ourselves better. But we rarely do.

I come from a long line of people who believe that medical problems are best dealt with by being ignored. If you go to the doctor, they will tell you something you don’t want to hear. Or try to fix something that isn’t broken and then charge you a lot of money for it. So, my people usually seek out help only when it is too late to do any good.

We’re not that unusual. So many of us don’t do that which would help us heal. A woman diagnosed with lung cancer continues to smoke. The manic-depressive stops taking his medicine.

Cardiac rehabilitation is offered to individuals after cardiac events to aid recovery. Rehab has been shown to improve physical health, and prevent further cardiac illness. Such programs achieve this through exercise, education, psychological counselling, and support. Surveys across a number of countries show that only about 40 percent of potential cardiac patients take advantage of these programs. Of those that do participate, fewer than 50% maintain an exercise program for as long as six months after completion of rehab.<sup>2</sup> We so often fail to take the path that leads towards healing.

I’ve never been married so maybe there is some important bit of information that I am missing, some nuance that I don’t get. But when your spouse says, *Honey, I think we need to go see a counselor*, is there any answer other than *yes*? Even if you think it won’t work, even if you think counseling is a waste of time and money, shouldn’t you still say *yes*? In my twenty years of ministry, I’ve never once heard a couple say that their marriage ended because of too much counseling.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4164451/>

What's the worst that can happen? Your spouse might think that the marriage means something to you. And there is a possibility that the relationship might be strengthened. There is a slim possibility that healing might take place.

Many of us stick with what we know rather than go with the slim possibility of healing.

I have no idea what healing needs to take place in your life. Maybe it is something as straightforward as a skin ailment. Or maybe it's something more complicated because it is pain hidden deep inside.

And let's be clear about this. There are some situations that aren't in our power to improve, some medical conditions that no amount of praying and bathing in the Jordan will reverse. To say otherwise is to tell a lie and to somehow blame the victim for their situation. For example, to say to a person struggling with ALS that they can be healed of the disease if they just try harder and have a better attitude is cruel. But there are some aspects of our healing and wholeness that are in our power to improve.

What are you willing to do in order to be more whole? Would you bathe in the Orlontangy? Would you walk away from an unhealthy relationship? Would you do the hard work of repairing a broken one? Would you admit that you are wrong? Would you change your diet? Would you see a therapist? Would you work less?

What are you willing to do in order to be more whole?

Keep in mind that we never get there all at once. Naaman really doesn't change that much. There are still things that he doesn't get. He tries to pay Elisha for the cure, still believing that healing is something that can be bought and sold. What he has yet to fully recognize is that wealth, power, and position do not secure access to God's healing; on the contrary, those things tend to get in the way.

Naaman is still learning how to travel light.

But I would caution against being too hard on Naaman. Because he does what so many of us are afraid to do. He lets the whole world see just how broken he is and then he receives a piece of the healing and wholeness that he so deeply longs for.

All he has to do is follow directions. All he has to do is step away from all that has defined him in the world. All he has to do is abandon the pretense that who he is or what he is worth can get him what he needs. All he has to do is strip himself down until his hurt is exposed for everyone to see.<sup>3</sup> All he has to do is travel light.

The season of Lent begins on Wednesday. It's a 40-day journey to crucifixion and resurrection. May we travel light this Lent, carrying with us only those things that help us grow closer to God.

The lighter we travel, the easier it is to embrace the possibility of healing.

May we travel light.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 161. I borrowed images and structure from her excellent sermon on this text.