

July 4, 2010
United Church of Northfield
2 Kings 5:1-16

Stories of Journey and Discovery
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Introduction

I have a friend in Southern Vermont who has been on a journey in search of healing for the three years that I have known her. Indeed, her quest is longer than three years. Nancy is seriously affected by the debilitating effects of Lyme disease. This is the disease caused by the bite of the deer tick. If the disease is not diagnosed in the very early stages and treated by antibiotics, it can be very difficult to eradicate. In my observation, Nancy will have days when she has no extra energy. Then she will have days when she has normal amounts of energy.

The cure for Lyme Disease is controversial. At this point after consulting many traditional doctors, Nancy has turned to Asian medicine and herb therapy under a Chinese doctor. In spite of her energy level swings, Nancy is determined to have a full life and contribute meaningfully to society. So she sings regularly in her church choir and several choral groups. She volunteers at several organizations in town. She depends strongly on several members of her church community for support. And for comfort she has the companionship of her two cats. She has begun a new herbal therapy, and last week she told me she thought she was feeling better. Even so, her journey in search of healing continues. As her search for healing goes on she continues to be a blessing to her community and they are a blessing to her.

Other mythic journey's

Nancy is on her journey to health and wholeness, as was Naaman in our Old Testament scripture. In the annals of world literature, the epic journey is a classic theme. I will mention several epic journey stories which have some elements in common with the journey in quest of healing taken by Naaman. They are, of course, far more dramatic, with more sharply drawn characters than Naaman's story.

The xi you ji –The Journey West

Last Monday night, I had an unexpected chance to visit the Asian Cultural Center in Brattleboro. The occasion was an informal lecture and video presentation of the "xi you ji" which means The Journey West in Chinese. This is the story of a priest and his 3 companions – horse, pigsey and monkey, and their long journey to India to a Buddhist shrine. This long saga was first completely written down in the 1500's. The story itself may be older. However, the Journey West remains very popular in Chinese culture today. There is a theme park that illustrates the story with life-sized characters. About 15 years ago, there was an animated cartoon series that runs to 25 episodes. The story has all the elements of a good road trip. The characters have problems and monkey must fight off attacks from demons. But eventually, they reach their goal in India.

Don Quixote

Many of you are familiar with a similar epic, Don Quixote, another story of seekers on a journey. This story comes from Spanish literature and you may have read it in world literature class. Don Quixote has his sidekick Sancho to help him as he journeys in his quest. The story is old, but it has entered popular culture through the medium of the Broadway musical.

Star Wars the Movie

Perhaps even more famous today is George Lucas' movie, Star Wars, and the prequel and follow-on movies that it spawned. This movie has all the required elements of a person on a quest. The main character, Luke Skywalker, has his required sidekicks – the two robots

and Chewbacka. There is the wise priest/prophet named Yoda, who functions in much the same role as Merlin in the saga of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Luke Skywalker travels from one end of the Universe to the other in his quest to find the purpose and meaning of his life.

Scripture Connection

Now, let us look at the Old Testament story in detail and see what it may have to teach us.

The journey of Naaman

Naaman is the leader of the king of Aram's armies. His role in life is like the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in our own army structure. Naaman is obviously a very successful person, but he has just one big, haunting problem. He has leprosy. A disease that was feared and difficult to cure. Aram has been fighting with neighboring Israel, and on one of their raids over the border they had captured a girl who became the servant of Naaman's wife. The servant girl tells Naaman's wife, that if her husband would only search out the prophet in Israel, he would know how to cure the leprosy.

In what I suspect is an act of desperation, Naaman agrees to go to Israel in search of a cure. So Naaman gets a letter of reference from the king of Aram, and goes to the king of Israel. And, in case the cure is very expensive, he brings his Visa card – well not really, he brings with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. When the king of Israel meets Naaman, he's very annoyed by the idea that just because he's a king, he can cure leprosy.

Elisha the prophet hears about this blunder and asks for Naaman to visit him. But when Naaman arrives at Elisha's place, Elisha merely sends a messenger with the prescription for Naaman's cure: "wash in the Jordan seven times, and you will be clean." Rather than being grateful and overjoyed, Naaman is insulted by the fact that Elisha won't see him in person and give him the respect due a famous general. At last, he calms down, goes to the Jordan River, follows Elisha's prescription and is healed. Finally, Naaman is converted to the worship of the God of Israel, and returns home with two cart loads of soil so he can worship Yaweh on the holy ground of the soil of Israel.

The Lessons of Naaman's Journey

While this story is a bit of a comic opera, full of ironic plot twists, there are some important things going on in this story that are common to all personal and spiritual quests. Lets now discover the insights of the story.

Role of slave girl.

This story has a number of significant insights into the way God works. The most obvious is that God works in ways we do not expect, and God works through people who come into our lives in an often tangential manner. The un-named lowly slave girl has the answer, but Naaman instead first asks the King of Israel to cure him. He looks to someone on his own level in society to orchestrate his cure. Here, the powerless, the lowly, outwit and out think the powerful.

Crossing borders

Another theme in this story is that the answer is found by crossing borders. Naaman literally crosses the border into Israel where the answer lies and the cure takes place. Again, this is a common theme for seekers on their journey. In the Chinese epic, xi you ji, the priest and his sidekicks travel to India to find the answers to their quest. In the movie, Star Wars, Luke Skywalker, with his trusty sidekick, Chewbacka, bounces from Galaxy to Galaxy and solar system to solar system to find the answer to his quest.

Role of Elisha (God's mediator)

Then, there is the puzzling role of Elisha, the prophet. While prophets have a reputation for confronting kings and disbelievers, in this case, Elisha, is on the alert, watching

the drama of Naaman's search unfold. When he fails to get a cure from the King of Israel, Elisha rescues him from that situation and points him in the correct direction. The other point here is that God does the healing, Elisha does not. He only points the way.

Unexpected discovery, amazing grace

Finally, Naaman makes an important discovery that may well be much more important than his search for a cure. When Naaman began his journey as a search for a cure for Leprosy. I suspect that he did not view himself as being on a spiritual quest. Yet, in the end, his greater discovery was a new faith in the God of Israel. Truly, Naaman's story is a story of amazing grace. He was lost and then through cure and new found faith, and God's grace, he found himself again.

Conclusion – Our Personal Journeys here at United Church

We are all of us on a journey. Our quest may not be, like Naaman's, "how do I get healed of this disease of Leprosy." Our quest, may be more generic, like "how do I live a happy life?" Indeed, as we age, we may find ourselves on a quest that has a health related question. The life questions we pose to ourselves, may be the same or they may change considerably during our lifetime. However, regardless of the question and the search that we are on, our search is ultimately spiritual. Then the question is essentially, "how does God help me make sense of my life?"

It is important for us to find the proper partners in the journey. Who are the Sanchos and Chebackas in our social circle? Sometimes, like the slave girl in Naaman's story, the person who has the key answer to our quest may be someone quite unlike us. The key may well be for us to be willing to journey to new places and to cross borders into new and unexplored territory. The question is, will we be willing to make these leaps of faith – leaps from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the ordinary and expected to the unusual and unexpected.

Will we be persistent in our quest, will we be willing to search and continue when one answer does not seem to be the correct choice? Amen!