

Down By the River

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Most of us know the story by Hans Christian Anderson entitled *The Emperor's New Clothes* – about the emperor of a land who's first and primary concern is the wardrobe he is wearing and his appearance to his subjects. His eagerness for the latest style leaves him vulnerable to a couple of swindlers who convince him of their ability to make clothes so fine they can be seen only by those fit for their positions. So the Emperor falls for it, convinces himself that what he can't see he really can see, and dons for his public clothes that are not really clothes. And because they can only be seen by those fit for their positions, no one wants to admit that the emperor has no clothes. Finally, as the emperor processes through the city, a little child along the parade route cries, "But the emperor has nothing at all on." Though the parents try to hush the child, just that one statement is enough for the crowd, including the emperor, to come to terms with the fact that emperor has no clothes.

Sometimes the hardest person to see is you.

A long time ago I learned from my driver's education teacher about something called a blind spot. Whenever you get behind the wheel, he said, understand you have a blind spot. You got three mirrors, six windows – but there is a place on the road you can't see. You are most vulnerable, said Mr. Walny, when you fail to remember your blind spot.

The story of the Syrian general Naaman is one of those many surprise stories of the Bible. It's one of those stories where God appears to be up to something but it's hard for people to see it. They have their blind spots. The Syrian general has been afflicted with leprosy and is desperate for

healing, but there was no cure for these leprous spots on his skin. It rendered him unclean and highly contagious – at least that’s what people thought back then. We’ve learned a lot about leprosy since. No one in the modern world thinks that leprosy makes anyone unclean. Afflicted by this ancient stigma Naaman learns of a prophet in Israel, Elisha, who is reported to have healing power. So Naaman approaches the king of Israel with a letter of reference from his own king – but the King so wrapped up in his own political fiefdom refuses to see what Israel could do for a Syrian. Now it’s about politics. God was beside the point. Healing was beside the point. It’s what side of the border are you on? So the king of Israel refuses the Syrian. He has his blind spot when it comes to God being up to something. Finally, Elisha speaks up to the king and says, “Send him to me!” So Naaman and his men and his chariots ride up to the prophet’s house and assume that the prophet will come out and do some hand waving and some hocus pocus and be done with it. This is as much as the general will stoop to have happen. But that’s not what the prophet does. Instead the prophet does not even greet the high ranking general and instead sends orders out that the general should go and wash himself in the Jordan seven times. “Excuse me,” says the general. “Doesn’t he know who he’s dealing with? I demand a little more respect. Furthermore the Jordan River is a sorry excuse for a river – doesn’t even touch the rivers in my land.” All this being said by a man with spots all over his skin. Spots he and everybody else can see. But apparently the one spot Naaman can’t see is his blind spot. And his blind spot is his pride. He can’t see his pride. He can’t see that the one thing that is keeping him from his own healing is his pride. He’d rather forgo the healing than own up to his pride. But his advisors talk sense into him and he goes down to the yucky Jordan ... and he washes the seven times – and he is made clean.

Sometimes the hardest person to see is you. Sometimes the hardest healing to effect is your own.

It’s interesting that Jesus recounted this story to the Nazarenes when he made a visit back to his hometown. He was in the middle of talking about how he was perhaps the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy to preach good news to the poor, healing to the blind and release to the captives – and

then he says to his hometown crowd, "You know, you guys might be the last to understand. You know me so well, you may not be able to see me. There were lots of lepers in Israel – but the only leper that Elisha healed who was not in Israel but from far away. The last place a prophet is welcome is back home. But the Nazarenes couldn't see this, of course. And they were enraged, of course. And they took Jesus to the edge of the cliff, of course. And they wanted to throw him over, of course. They saw everything except what was right there in front of them.

It's not a new story for the people of Israel. They've seen this over and over again. King Saul goes looking for a good second in command but the blind spot of his insecurity prevents him from seeing that the best candidate is actually the guy who is second in command – the brilliant soldier David. Samuel goes looking for the next king of Israel – but he can't seem to find him among the oldest sons of Jesse because the blind spot says it always has to be the oldest – and he can't see the youngest staring him in the face. King David can't seem to see that he has everything – he can't seem to see this growing lust inside him for more and he throws away his integrity. Solomon asks for and receives wisdom – but even with all that wisdom he can't quite see what it means to follow after God's own heart. The Pharisees and the Saducees and the Scribes – the righteous ones, the learned ones, the holy ones – can't see standing in front of them The Righteous One, The Learned One, The Holy One.

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Some of you remember the incident involving General George S. Patton, one of the commanding U.S. generals of World War II. He had risen the ranks destined, it appeared, for what he believed his life purpose was – to command the armies in an operation as important and as strategic as D-Day. But his lust for battle and displays of courage got the better of him when he slapped and berated two soldiers inside a week who were suffering shell shock. PTSD is what we call it now. The brilliant general could see just about everything except what he couldn't see. He lost his chance to

command the invasion of Normandy. And what he couldn't see is what kept him from what he most wanted to do.

So today on this All Saint's Sunday we have remembered the scores of those in our family who have fought the good fight, finished the course and kept the faith. They have gone to their reward. And maybe on their way what they've been given the chance to see is all what they couldn't see while with us. All those blind spots. Isn't that what the apostle promised – that now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we know in part, but then we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known. I can imagine that day. Me as a preacher face to face with my Creator – will I laugh or will I cry when he tells me all the times I stood before the people thinking the black robe was covering all the blindness and brokenness of my own life. When the title of my degree kept me from seeing things right in front of me. Will I laugh or will I cry – when God by his grace shows me all the things I couldn't see about myself. All the things I couldn't see about other people. All the blind spots. Preacher, he'll say, heal thyself. And, of course, I'll say, but I can't. And he'll say to me ... and yes to you ... and yes to all the saints – come to the table. And be forgiven. And see yourself now – as I have always seen you.