

Sunday, July 7, 2013: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

You may be better organized than I am, but in my overscheduled life, every once in a while I miss an appointment. Then comes the dreaded e-mail: “I have on my calendar that we were doing lunch today at noon. I looked for you, but didn’t see you. Call me . . .”

Now comes the fantasy move, the leap into a world of wondering that Jerome Berryman calls “godly play.” What would it be like to receive such an e-mail from God? “By the way, my reign came very near you this morning and you completely missed it. Meet you next time? GOD.”

Hermann Hesse explored this idea years ago in his novel *The Journey to the East*. The protagonist H. H. writes a history of his experience in an amazing religious movement that’s centered on a servant/prophet named Leo. H. H. describes how the pilgrimage journey ran into difficulties and abruptly ended. But in the course of the novel, readers discover, along with H. H., that a man H. H. saw who had looked much like Leo was Leo. In fact, the journey had been continuing around H. H., although he hadn’t noticed it; he had dropped out without realizing what had happened. I imagine another e-mail from God: “What has become of the love you had at first? Haven’t heard from you in a while. Shall we do church? I’ll call you again, GOD.”

I wouldn’t want to imply that church attendance protects Christians against such missed appointments. I suspect that even regular churchgoers miss signs of God’s mysterious reign.

So I am intrigued by Luke’s description of the mission of the 70 disciples of Jesus to “every town and place where he himself intended to go.” They were to cure the sick and proclaim the reign of God to all who welcome them. What did they proclaim to those who do not welcome them? “The reign of God has come near to you”—and you missed it!

I am even more intrigued by the story of Naaman the Aramean (Syrian) in 2 Kings 5, because this healing almost didn’t happen three times! Naaman was an important

person, and he knew it. But he suffered from a debilitating skin disease and would have continued to do so if a young servant from Israel had not intervened to get the miracle on track by mentioning the prophet in Samaria who could cure Naaman. God's reign was drawing near to Naaman through her intervention, although he could not see it yet.

Assuming, perhaps, that the prophet Elisha worked in the king's court, the king of Aram sent Naaman, loaded down with expensive gifts, to the king and asked him to heal his servant Naaman. But the king of Israel—a regular churchgoer?—seemed to have completely forgotten God's amazing power to heal and the presence of God's prophet Elisha in Israel. He jumped to the conclusion that the king of Aram was setting him up, thereby provoking a war with him. He tore his clothes to show his outrage and distress.

Elisha himself intervened the second time to get the miracle back on track. He said that Naaman could come to him to learn what the king of Israel was supposed to know already: that there was a prophet in Israel. God waited to heal Naaman and would not be defeated by royal blindness. So Naaman arrived at the home of Elisha with his horses, chariots and expensive gifts. The miracle was almost derailed for the third time. The great man had done his homework and knew something of the standard protocol for a healing ritual. He seemed to have expected that, given his status, the prophet would not only have followed the standard operating procedure but might even have added some flourishes.

But Elisha's actions did not conform to his expectations. The prophet sent a messenger to tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan, and Naaman lost it: I've been insulted. And besides, Syrian rivers are as powerful as Samaritan rivers! He left in a rage to return home. Then his servants rescued the miracle for the third time. They suggested that he had already gone to considerable trouble to arrive there and that what Elisha commanded could be done easily. Why not just do it? They knew him well enough to point out that if Elisha had required something difficult, Naaman would have managed it. Their argument prevailed; Naaman washed seven times in the Jordan and his skin disease was gone.

The reign of God always wins in the end because it is the reign of God, but this story, especially when paired with Luke 10, worries me. How many appointments with God have I missed unwittingly? How many times have Jesus' messengers stopped by my town and I didn't notice them? "The reign of God has come near" whether I saw the miracle or missed out on it.