

Remember the water: 2 Kings 5:1-14

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

Could Peter Leithart be on to something when he calls 2 Kings 5 “the richest Old Testament story of baptism,” one that “anticipates Christian baptism”? The very thought of baptism makes me shudder. I remember mine, since my parents didn’t take me to be sprinkled as an infant. At age eight, terrified by a Baptist preacher, I sprinted to the altar to avoid the flames of hell. In short order, I found myself donning waders in a bathtub-like pool behind the choir. The minister hoisted me backward not once but thrice, dunking my head under water—more traumatic than you might imagine since I had never learned to swim. I flailed and embarrassed myself and the preacher.

Embarrassment is simply the nervous side of humility. Humility is hard, but it is simply the truth about us, as it was the truth about Naaman. Yes, he was a man of valor, of substance. But—there is always a “but”—he was a leper. Greatness, or pretended greatness, inevitably encounters humility. Naaman’s unsought humility was mirrored to him in the person of a young woman, small of stature; he was a captain, she was a captive. All other healers having failed him, Naaman was desperate enough to follow her tip. The not-yet-humbled Naaman rumbled up to Elisha’s house reining in his stallions, bearing gifts, expecting to pay his way to healing, to grease a few palms.

Elisha was unimpressed. After all, once you’ve seen chariots and horses blazing with fire and soaring above the clouds (2 Kings 2), a bunch of steeds pulling a cocky chieftain atop wooden wheels just doesn’t raise your pulse. Not deigning to come out, Elisha dissed Naaman, enraging him. Naaman was prideful, but perhaps pride was all he had left. He did much as we might do in the privacy of the doctor’s or therapist’s office: we’ve dressed well, and we mention some cool thing we did last night. But obviously we have come not for banter but to be healed, to reveal the “but,” to expose what hinders us, hoping, blushing. The “but,” the wound, is the shutter thrown open to receive the morning sun.

How fascinating: Elisha could have come out; he could have made the trip himself to Damascus; he could have healed at a distance. But he let Naaman come to him.

When Joseph's brothers were hungry, Joseph could have shipped food to them, but he let them come. Joseph didn't want them merely to fill their bellies; he wanted to heal the relationship. Elisha didn't want Naaman merely to be rid of leprosy; he wanted him to be more deeply healed. By not even paying him the courtesy of coming to the door, Elisha reversed the sorry tale that Jesus would tell of a rich man not coming to the door to help out a poor leper.

Elisha's prescription wasn't courteous either: bathe in the Jordan. Pilgrims to Israel chuckle when they see the Jordan; it's hardly a river at all, more like a stream or a creek. Naaman protested: shouldn't my cure be more dazzling, perhaps a dip in the pools by the Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Or some exotic salve imported from Ethiopia? It's just water, it's always been there; it's all around, it's what I am made of.

Faith is the crumpling of pride, best achieved through something as simple, as obvious, as unimpressive as a bit of water that only Elisha or somebody desperately thirsty would think of as powerful. I do not know if Naaman flailed a bit trying to get his whole body under such a shallow, coursing stream. But we know there was a miracle in that water. Sure, the leprosy washed downstream. Yet more important, when Naaman stepped up onto the river bank, drenched and dripping, he was no longer a man but a boy: "His flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child," like the little maiden who showed him the way, like all of us when we become like children.

Without romanticizing childhood, we may recognize its virtues: vulnerability; an implicit demand for justice; the way children show their treasures, weep in the open, accept grace readily and are easily amazed. All of Christianity is a kind of return to childhood, a training in humility. All of our gestures seem silly: folding our hands, bowing our heads, kneeling. How do you get ahead or defend yourself acting in these ways? We believe in vulnerability, humility and even dipping in a no-account river on the suggestion of a two-bit prophet who wouldn't answer the door. The foolishness of God is wiser than all of us.

The humility goes on. Sensing that his nascent excitement about Elisha's God would be compromised at home, Naaman rather charmingly scooped up some dirt to carry back with him so as to cling to some piece of holiness in an unholy place. "Elisha does not expect Naaman to abandon the world or withdraw into a ghetto where he can escape moral dilemmas and difficulties" (Leithart). Not only is our postbaptized life full of dilemmas and difficulties, we continue to fail miserably. We cannot heal

ourselves or achieve what God wants of us. But we remember the water, the awkward humiliation. Wasn't it precisely at that moment of spiraling out of control, of losing all hope and dignity, that a slight rustling of wings was heard, and a whispered message, something like "this is my beloved child"?