

SERMON TITLE: "Stressed Out by Health? God Can Help!"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Kings 5:1-15b
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 25, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The other day on the radio, I heard a reporter telling her own story of being a pregnant woman in Florida. The area where she lives has the Zika virus, and, even as she spoke, she reported having a mosquito bite on her ankle. She'd been bitten some months earlier in her pregnancy, too, but after that, she'd gotten the all-clear. This new bite on her ankle hadn't yet been analyzed. Can you imagine how much fear and anxiety that might cause in you for your own well-being and the prospects for your baby?

Risk to our own health and the health of those we care about can cause us an incredible amount of stress. As we imagine the worst, our worries are magnified. And that's just what happens when we don't know for sure. While it's usually a help to receive an actual diagnosis, having to live with sickness, chronic pain, weakness, and deteriorating abilities is quite worrisome too. The longer we have to cope with such travails of our body and mind, the more our emotions are frayed. The more we get stressed out.

A couple weeks ago, we started a sermon series called "Stressed Out? God Can Help!" In week one, we talked about how God can help us manage activity stress. Last Sunday we talked about how God can help us with relationship stress. Today, I want us to think about our health—or the lack of it. Let's consider the story of Naaman in 2 Kings, chapter 5. When we're stressed out by health, let's see how God can help.

1—BY PROVIDING HEALING PEOPLE

In this story of Naaman, the first point we see is that, when we're stressed out by health problems, God can help by providing healing people. Naaman was a commander of an army, but that high rank didn't prevent him from getting sick with leprosy. And, apparently, he didn't have a medic in the Aramean army who could help him. But God provided another source of help through the healing people of Israel.

On a previous raid into Israel, the Arameans had taken a young Jewish girl captive. She had been placed into the service of Naaman's wife. Observing the misery of her mistress's husband, that young Jewish girl dared to offer her assistance. She told them about a man in Samaria who could cure Naaman of his leprosy. After learning of that possibility, Naaman sought the support of the king of Aram, who gave permission for Naaman to seek out the prophet Elisha. Naaman went to Elisha's house, and Elisha's messenger then gave Naaman the instruction he needed. When Naaman balked at what he was told, his own servants persuaded him to do what was required. Over and over again, Naaman was supported by healing people whom God provided for him.

When we are stressed out about our health problems, God provides healing people for us too. Of course, there will always be people who are a bad influence—the ones who tell us by their words or their actions that it's OK to keep on smoking, drinking, overeating, abusing drugs, and not exercising. If that's the message we want to hear, there are plenty of unhealthy people who will gladly help us die sooner. But, if we want to live the abundant life that God offers, then we can also look around us and see the multitude of positive influencers that God has provided for us. We can see the doctors, spouses, children, therapists, exercise group participants, and congregation members who—by their words and examples—show us how to live in a healthier manner.

God doesn't want us to stress out over health problems. That's why God has provided for us an array of healing people who can encourage us, educate us, inspire us, and show us the way to better health.

2—BY PROVIDING HEALING METHODS

When we're stressed out by health problems, a second way God can help is by providing healing methods. Second Kings, chapter 5, doesn't tell us if Naaman had unsuccessfully tried other remedies already there in Aram. Maybe he had. Like some of us, maybe he had gone a long time without a sure diagnosis or an effective treatment plan. Maybe he'd been suffering from this skin problem for a long time and had begun to believe that there was no hope, no possibility of overcoming this sickness. Yet, in the lowly voices

of a young slave girl and a prophet's messenger, God's healing method was provided. Go to Samaria to the prophet. Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.

As with most miracle stories, we aren't told why this healing method worked. Who knows? Maybe army commander Naaman had contracted his skin disease while he was raiding Israel, and maybe that's why he needed to return there, where people were more familiar and therefore had more expertise with that particular skin ailment. Maybe the water of the Jordan River had some natural minerals or other elements that made it more soothing. Or maybe the sevenfold washing in the river had some kind of placebo effect. We'll never know. Three thousand years later, all we can know for sure is that God helped Naaman by providing a healing method.

Today, when we're stressed out by health problems, we're unlikely to be told to go wash in the Jordan River. But we may be told to do other things—like take pills, get lots of rest, don't strain ourselves, or to do occupational, physical, or emotional therapy. We may be told that we need to get x-rays, CT scans, or MRIs. We may need surgery, radiation, or chemo. We may have to travel to Salt Lake City or some other place that specializes in our disease or dysfunction. Fortunately, most of us have health insurance, cars, and family or friends to assist us in doing these things that are required. Fortunately, medical science and technology are constantly improving so that the available treatments are more and more effective. Yes, I know, we all get frustrated sometimes when the methods don't seem to work, and we complain that our doctors are just "practicing" medicine. But, even when we don't get the exact cure we're hoping for, I believe it's absolutely true that God can help us by providing many amazing healing methods that do improve our lives.

3—PROVIDING HEALING ATTITUDES

You might have noticed that I've skipped over an important aspect of Naaman's story. When we're stressed out by health or the lack of it, God can help by providing healing attitudes. This third way that God can help might actually be the hardest. But without healing attitudes, the healing people and healing

methods that God provides might not even have a chance of working. Sometimes our sicknesses are caused by or worsened by our stubbornness. Sometimes our diseases continue and persist because of our unwillingness to submit to treatment. Unless we allow God to challenge and change our attitudes, we may not be able to receive the help that God wants to give.

This story of Naaman spells this out pretty clearly. It was good that the army commander was willing to follow the advice of his wife's foreign slave girl. That showed considerable openness on his part. At that beginning point in the story he was able to muster a healing attitude. Naaman was able to hold onto that healing attitude through his visits to his own king and Israel's king. But, when Naaman arrived at the Prophet Elisha's house, he was greeted only by the prophet's messenger, who didn't do the fancy tricks Naaman expected. And that really ticked Naaman off. His nerves were frayed, his patience was shot, and he definitely lacked a healing attitude. If Naaman had been left to his own devices at that point, he would not have received the healing he needed.

But God didn't leave Naaman to his own devices. God used Naaman's own servants to challenge and change his attitude. Essentially, they told him, Get over yourself and off your high horse. Stop thinking of yourself as some high and mighty macho commander who deserves special treatment and recognize that you have a problem that needs attention. "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?" they asked him. "How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'"

Of course, Naaman had to get over his prejudice against Israel, as well. Previously, Samaria—or Israel, as it was also called—had been a battle enemy. Only if Naaman could now see this place in a more positive light—with a more healing attitude—would he be able to receive its healing benefits.

It wasn't an easy task for God to provide Naaman with a healing attitude. It took a nagging physical illness, the assistance of two kings, the courage of three sets of servants, and a foreign river. Maybe if Naaman hadn't been so stubborn, God wouldn't have had to take Naaman through all those motions. But,

he was who he was. And, so, little by little, God challenged and changed Naaman's perspective. God helped by providing Naaman a healing attitude.

This reminds me of stories I've heard in the past of how a father or a mother finally stopped smoking not just because of their doctor's advice but finally because of the pleading of their own small children. Other times, though, God helped provide a healing attitude through pictures of black lungs and the funerals of relatives. Fortunately, in one way or another, God has gotten through to most of us in regard to smoking. But maybe today God is working more on our attitudes about diet and exercise, so we don't suffer so much from diabetes and heart disease. Maybe God is working on our mindset about the use and abuse of pain medications. Maybe God is trying to get through to us about our need for a hearing test, a colonoscopy, a mammogram, or a flu shot. Or maybe God is trying to overcome our pride and shame in regard to seeking help for problems of mental health.

Naaman got angry when Elisha's messenger told him what he needed to do. In a rage, Naaman turned his back and walked away. Is that what we're going to do? Is that what we're already doing? If so, it's time to stop reacting that way and let God challenge and change us. The good news of this story is that, when we're stressed out by health, God can help by providing a healing attitude.

CONCLUSION

Maybe you've seen a poem titled "What Cancer Cannot Do." It goes like this:

Cancer is so limited . . .
 It cannot cripple love.
 It cannot shatter hope.
 It cannot corrode faith.
 It cannot eat away peace.
 It cannot destroy confidence.
 It cannot kill friendship.
 It cannot shut out memories.
 It cannot silence courage.
 It cannot reduce eternal life.
 It cannot quench the Spirit.

--by Dr. Robert L. Lynn

There are all kinds of things that cancer and other horrible diseases cannot do. But there's something amazing God can do by providing us healing people, healing methods, and healing attitudes. We should never forget that, when we're stressed out by health, God can help!