

Miracle market: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

by [Barbara Cawthorne Crafton](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

There is an odd reticence about the healings in the lessons for this Sunday—there's an expectation of big-bang pyrotechnics, followed by a matter-of-factness in the healings that seems to disappoint. The haughty Naaman is downright offended by the simplicity of Elisha's prescription for curing his leprosy. *I thought he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place . . .*

But nothing that glamorous is planned: Naaman should just go and wash himself in the river. The *river!* As if he hadn't tried washing before. As if the river Jordan were somehow a better river than the great rivers of Syria, his own country. Naaman is like the man in an old joke who is caught in a flood and goes up on the roof, where he intends to wait for God to rescue him. Person after person comes by in a rowboat, offering to take him to safety. *No, thanks*, he says. *I know God's going to save me.* Finally the waters rise over him, and he dies. When he gets to heaven, he complains, *I prayed and prayed, but you didn't save me!* And God answers, *I sent four rowboats and you didn't get into any of them.*

We don't claim the healings that come to us. Instead, we set the evidentiary bar so high for a miracle of healing that a dozen miracles happen to us and we don't notice any of them. For us, a miracle has to be magic, full of special effects, before we'll pay any attention. But most of the miracles we know are like rowboats. They come along regularly, but you have to get into them to get the full effect. When it comes to miracles, we are snobbish.

Who is it, after all, who encourages Naaman to go along with Elisha down to the river and wash, as the holy man has told him to do? His servants. Who persuades him to seek out Elisha, the famous holy man, in the first place? A little slave girl whom his soldiers had kidnapped from Israel. People without pretensions. People who have little to lose by looking foolish. People who know they don't count for

much in the worldly scheme of things.

Here's the clue: there aren't special miracles for "important people." They don't heal differently from poor people but are simply other brothers and sisters in pain and sorrow, and in sharing the same joy in Christ. The unimportant go first in the order of this kingdom, leading the way for the rest of us. The hierarchy of worldly privilege is gone, and blessings tumble abundantly over everyone.

Yet the reluctance to claim the miracles continues in the Gospel reading from Mark. Here Jesus himself seems shy about what he has done. *Don't tell anyone*, he warns the cleansed leper, but the man disobeys, and soon Jesus is on the run, hiding from the crowds. He draws back from the display of his power, even though his miracles are performed to show people that the kingdom is near.

Why? Is it because the people are not ready? Did they need to live through the weakness and despair of the end of Jesus' story on earth before they can be trusted with the fullness of his power? Perhaps they need to know the darkness before they can handle that light. It is the same with Christians today. Would we stick around to hear the whole story of who Jesus is if healing miracles were a common occurrence? Mightn't we just pick up our miracle and go home?

Even those closest to Jesus sometimes resembled Naaman. They had a hard time with the ordinariness of him, with his humiliation at the hands of a powerful and corrupt authority. He was the Christ, they agreed. But he ought to show his power more explicitly. He ought to show them who he was. "If you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross" his enemies taunted him, and his friends wondered why he didn't do just that.

But would "showing" them his power have made the difference in Jesus' ministry? To claim a healing does not erase our humanness. The Jesus who healed people miraculously was also a person, and died in weakness. We claim a Jesus who is both God and human. Our faith and our human history walk through time together, and we can see God at work in the way faith and history influence each other.

Positive outcomes to problems do not certify the power of God except to those who read the story of humankind by the light of their faith. Believers are already disposed to see God's power at work. For the others, those who were alive when he walked the earth but who didn't claim the faith, Jesus' life must have looked like a failure. *Is that all?* some must have said. *He seemed so promisingly powerful. Was*

all that just destroyed? I'm glad I wasn't foolish enough to believe. Think how embarrassed I'd be now.

We see this power because we claim it, because, in a sense, we decide to see God at work. Someone heals spontaneously, or survives a difficult surgery, and sees a miracle. Someone dies on a cross and the world sees failure and turns away. Others, however, glimpsed eternal life. They realized that they have a say in what they will accept and who they will follow.

Like them, we are not compelled by evidence. We are invited in, by faith.