

**Itchy.**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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**November 4, 2018**

*2 Kings 1-15a*

I've had these itchy bug bites, on my neck, underneath my ears, for 61 days. Ask me how I know they have been there for exactly 61 days? I got them in the line waiting to enter the stadium on the day my son graduated from boot camp at Fort Jackson. Let me tell you... there are some big people-eating bugs in South Carolina! And I thought Maine's black flies were rough. They've got nothing on what can get you in the palmetto state.

Maybe the reason these bug bites of mine haven't healed yet is because when I'm missing Zack, I run my hand through my hair and there they are – these bumps that just won't seem to away, but in a weird way connect me to that day and the last time I hugged him.

They still itch, so I still scratch at them. Cady or Clark or even our office manager Melissa will see me touch them and will tell me to cut it out, which of course only makes me want to itch them MORE.

Have you ever had a terrible, terrible itch? It starts as a little twinge, a mosquito bite at the beginning of its bloom, a little psoriasis, a heat rash. You do what you do with itches. You scratch 'em.

But your scratch sets off a histamine response in your endocrine system, which ramps up the discomfort. The rash spreads. You scratch more, and more hormones are released, and now the itch has grown to epic proportions. You try not to think about it, but the more you scratch, the bigger it gets.

General Naaman had an itch like that. The Bible calls it leprosy but really it was one of a number of unnamed skin conditions that was probably not life-threatening, because it didn't prevent him from active military duty. It just drove him COMPLETELY BONKERS, and probably everybody around him too. He sought medical advice from the finest physicians in ancient Syria. He went to the priests and made offerings and sacrifices to the Goddess of Skin Blemishes, but it seems that nobody could cure him.

Then a little slave girl piped up. She'd come to Syria as part of the spoils from a raid over the border into Israel. She knew someone who could help him. He was a prophet of YHWH, the strange God of the Israelites. Strange, mostly, because there was only one of Him. Neighboring countries had all

kinds of gods, but the Jews had only one. How could this non-specific God help him when the very God of Itches ignored his cries? What was this God's magic?

Naaman, having exhausted every other option, had nothing to lose. So he put on his military dress blues. He rounded up all his entourage and loaded his cart with gifts and coin to take to the neighboring country of Israel as payment for a cure.

Mistakenly, he went to the King's palace first—the top of the feeding chain. And why not? That's what powerful people do, right? They assume that other powerful people have all the answers. But the King of Israel, when he hears what Naaman wants, freaks out. There's a Syrian foreigner at his gate, with a caravan of people, expecting a cure. He's in a panic because he, as a powerful person, feels compelled to fix it.

I'm not going to say it's not good to be the king, but I will say this: the more people that depend on you for answers, the more we believe we have to deliver them. That's a lot of pressure. We forget to look around, forget that we are part of a community where others may be better suited to the task.

Elisha the prophets catches wind of Naaman's request and reminds him that while he might be the one to call on for governance, healing is the prophet's jurisdiction. He tells Naaman to come on over.

But when Naaman gets to Elisha's house, Elisha won't even come out to see him! There's the General, standing there in all his military glory, the conquering neighbor, with 6,000 shekels of gold in the caravan behind him, plus a herd of supporters and hangers-on, scratching, and scratching...

Out comes a servant, instead, saying: *"Elisha says you should go wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be made clean."*

Naaman leaves in a fury. The fury of the proud. The fury of those whose power has granted them nothing. The fury of the ITCHY. It can't be that easy. This guy must be playing a joke.

He is all set to go back to Syria and scratch some more, when another nameless servant pipes up.

Have you noticed how unruly all the little people, all the servants, are in this story? First the Hebrew slave girl, then the servant of Elisha, and now one of Naaman's own retinue... always questioning and troubleshooting and correcting the powerful people they serve. Restless.

*"What's the big deal? If Elisha had asked you to do something hard, you would have done it, right? So why not do this easy thing that he's suggesting?"*

Naaman is all out of calamine lotion. And the Jordan is right there. Why not? Seven times, he washes in the Jordan. Seems almost too simple.

Maybe it's hard to accept simple solutions to what feel like very complicated problems. Our world is an incredibly complicated place and we often feel like the flutter of a butterfly wing can cause a tsunami by the time it travels around the globe. And we are, each one of us, an intensely complex creature, carrying wounds and traumas from the past that we can't seem to even begin to unpack.

Sometimes, when I am sitting with a person who is in a lot of pain, a person who is itchy, I will ask them, "have you prayed about it?" About half the time, they say no. They are embarrassed. Prayer seems like such a simple solution, right? It is too simple. It can't possibly change things.

The other half of the time, they say yes. But even then, I sometimes see a glimmer in the corner of their eye that tells me they're lying. I know, because I've told that lie myself. They lie because they want to be the kind of people who pray to God when they have a problem, but they secretly know themselves to be too complicated, and maybe even a little bit unworthy. They don't want to put God to the test and be disappointed. They don't want to find out they are the one person God doesn't really love, because that's what they fear the most.

Something happens to us as teens and adults that make us think of ourselves this way. Maybe it's the accumulated disappointments, or failures that we hold onto for too long. Kids generally don't think this way, and its why Jesus several times told us to act more like them, when it comes to spiritual matters.

Here's what I would like to imagine. I wonder if on the 5th, or the 6th, or the 7th time into the Jordan, did Namaan begin to loosen up? Maybe he did a cannonball or a bellyflop, maybe stopped counting, the way kids will, and just surrendered to the moment, to the beautiful repetition, losing himself in it?

As you take communion this morning and you drink of the cup of blessings feel the juice flow into your body as if you were dipping into the Jordan River and know that God is here, just as God was there. And let go. Amen.