



Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx

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Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx -- January 2006

I was happy to be able to spend some time with you last night and to realize that you are a bunch of risk-takers. I suppose that's why you invited a Lutheran to preach...

I am honored to have been asked to share this time with you around a theme dear to my heart, Resistance and Rebirth for our cities and our future. I share your passion for our common future which is so shaped by what happens in our increasingly urbanized contexts. In order to help us enter into this time together, I have brought along some important world leaders (they have not yet mentioned who they are supporting in our presidential election, but I'm sure that they will all have something to say to us) -these leaders are the King of Aram, the King of Israel, General Namaan, the prophet Elisha and a captive child.

This sermon is excerpted from Newark's book, "Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx" [available from Booksense.com](http://booksense.com).

First, let me introduce General Namaan. He commands the King of Aram's army. We are told that he is mighty warrior and a great favorite of the King. He was a national hero. His chest is decorated with medals. His home is filled with luxuries, the spoils of war.

The other powerful person we meet in the first verse is the King of Aram himself. No one in the kingdom is more powerful than the King. He comes from old money and entrenched power. He is the connection that gives Namaan power. He's there to make grants and cosign his loans. Namaan has power because he is plugged into the King.

The next verse ushers in a third person, a little girl, someone with no power at all. She has no title or name. This third person is virtually a non-person to those around her. First off, she is a child. Back then, children were at the bottom. Back then, the word for child and the word for servant was one and the same. A recent article in the NY Times cites a study showing that the most likely person to become homeless in NYC today is a poor African American child younger than 5. The same study shows that due to increased demand for urban housing by those single adults who can pay high rents, homelessness is spreading to more and more low-income families who can't compete in the housing market. This is creating a situation where one out of every three African American children born poor in America's largest cities will stay in a homeless shelter before they enter the first grade. In Africa, things are exponentially worse with around 13 million children orphaned by AIDS. 13 million, and how many can we name? Maybe things haven't changed all that much for some children since the nameless child was taken captive in 2 Kings.

In addition to being a child, she's a girl, owned but unable to own property, spoken for, but unable to speak in a court of justice. Even in her place of worship, she must sit in a separate area, far from the action, in the back of the spiritual bus. So this female child come among us today is doubly powerless. But that is not all. She is also a war victim, torn from her family and forced into slavery in a foreign country with foreign gods and a foreign language. And there seems to be nothing she can do about it. She has no social power. No economic power. No political

power.No access to the official center of spiritual power. She is part of General Namaan's war booty brought home to enhance his upwardly mobile lifestyle, a new maid for the wife.

Now If anyone would need a rebirth it would be this little girl - poor, captive and undocumented. It would be different if she had been reborn with a different gender, to a different family in a different zip code with a different inheritance. Without that rebirth, no matter how hard she works for the General , she can never earn her freedom. She's trapped with no way out. Nobody knows the trouble she's seen. Nobody knows the plight of this motherless child. Nobody even knows her name.

Looking at these three folks - General Namaan, the King of Aram and the child, we might say that Namaan and the King represent those who have and the child represents those who have not. They are the conquerors and she is the conquered. They have connections and resources and she does not. They have power and she does not. They have wealth and she does not. They have names and she does not. She needs a rebirth and they do not... ..not... here everything breaks down. Here the way we like to divide things up falls apart. Here the way we tend to categorize one another and put this group here and that group there, this congregation in this category and that one in another, this church at risk... wealthy suburban churches are usually not the ones considered at risk...at least for us Lutherans... well right here it all falls apart. Sure the child needs a rebirth, desperately, she surely does, she needs freedom from her captivity, she needs release from her bondage...but so does Namaan. The very verse that ushers in Namaan in all his power and glory and might, also reminds us that these things are not without major limitations. Beneath the shiny medals on his chest, under the rich fabric of his elegant suits, Namaan suffers from a skin disease, probably leprosy, a skin disease that no one knows how to cure. Namaan's wallet is thick but his prognosis is poor... General Namaan the conqueror is captive to his condition too.

And a horrible condition it is - a systemic disease borne in the blood spreading to the internal organs, deep-seated in the bones, joints and marrow resulting in the deterioration of tissues between bones, causing deformity, the wasting away of muscles, loss of feeling in fingers and toes, hands and feet. Evidently the disease had not progressed to this point in Namaan's case, but he knew where it was going. Namaan had a skin disease that was more than skin deep. And you know... When I read that the most likely person to become homeless in NYC is a poor Black child ... when we consider that one out of every three Black children born poor in America's largest cities will stay in a homeless shelter before they enter the first grade...that substandard health care and education affect overwhelmingly children of color in our cities...well... In my neighborhood, now in Manhattan Valley on the Upper West Side, why is it that the housing project on one side of the street is filled with people of one complexion and the upper middle class housing on the other side of the street is filled with people of another complexion and everyone here can guess which is which? Why is it that in the housing on one side of the street, the ventilation system has not been cleaned in over 50 years and children are suffering with asthma in record numbers and you can guess which side of the street that is... and when our own national church demographic reflects the skin tone of those on the wealthier side of the street,

.then I'd say that we have a skin disease too. Now I'm speaking as a Lutheran here, but perhaps you know what I'm talking about out...Like General Naaman we have a skin disease. We don't call it leprosy We call it racism and like leprosy, it's systemic. It infects internal organs, it causes deterioration in the tissue of our common life, the wasting away of muscles, the loss of feeling, and even with the full weight of our best intentions and efforts, we can't purge ourselves from it. We have a systemic disease that disfigures our beauty and deteriorates life together. It's not just racism. It's class prejudice, homophobia. It's name is legion. It's name, speaking as a Lutheran here, is sin.

Let's go back to Namaan. He has this horrible disease and needs a rebirth. Business as usual won't work. None of his connections to the rich and famous make any difference. The King of Aram can cosign loans and issue grants, but he can't cure leprosy. There is only one connection that can help. One that Namaan has never taken seriously. One in his own household, never seen or treated as an equal. I don't know, but I imagine that Namaan was likely a kind master to this child. He probably gave her used clothes and leftover food, furniture and bedding, a small allowance when he was in a generous mood, a turkey at Thanksgiving, toys and candy at Christmas. Maybe even sent her to summer camp. But he didn't really consider that she might have anything much of value to offer him other than maid service. After all, she's the one without connections. She's the motherless child and nobody even knows her name.

Did I say nobody? Well there was Somebody wasn't there? There was that Somebody who knit her together in her mother's womb. That Somebody who said: *I have seen the misery of my people I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters, I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them.* That Somebody who stood up in the synagogue and said *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim liberty to the captives...to let the oppressed go free...* that Somebody whose eye is on the sparrow had an eye on this little girl. And you know, when that almighty, all merciful Somebody has an eye on you...folk can call you all kinds of things and it doesn't much matter because you resist their definitions, you know who you are as a child of God.

The circumstances of this child's life were enough to make a grown person weak. The injustices enacted against her were enough to break the spirit and shatter the faith of someone much more mature. But as I said Somebody had an eye on this little girl and with faith in that Somebody, this little girl found enough room in her heart to have compassion on Namaan, the very commander whose armies tore her away from her family and bound her as a servant to his wife. This child found room in her heart to care about Namaan's distress, to worry about Namaan's misery, to be concerned about Namaan's disease, and so she said to her mistress: *...If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.*

The way this story is usually told, the miracle doesn't come til the end. The miracle occurs when Namaan is healed. But that's not how I read this story. We don't have to wait for the end of the story to find a miracle, there's one right here - that this little girl finds enough room in her heart to care about a man it would have been so very easy, so very natural, for her to despise. But this little girl found it in her heart to do something supernatural...to meet hatred with love and violence with non-violent action. This wounded child found it in her heart to point out the way to Namaan's healing, to Namaan's rebirth.

This child did not define herself by her present circumstances. She resisted definition as a victim or a slave or a piece of booty. When God needed a witness, she spoke right up - not because she was a sweet, submissive servant in Namaan's household, oh no! She spoke up because she served a higher power with a higher purpose. Years before the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther Kings's daddy's daddy's daddy was ever conceived of, she knew the truth he so eloquently wrote of in his letter from the Birmingham Jail: *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.* And so this child living in poverty sets in motion a series of actions on the highest level of international government with her words.

The King of Aram sends a letter to the King of Israel introducing Namaan who takes with him a load of diplomatic gifts signifying status and wealth - he takes horses and chariots, silver and gold and ten sets of clothing. Namaan is still functioning within the system of worldly power plays, leveraging influence, letters from King to King, man to man, bank to bank... currying political favor with expensive gifts...

Now at least the King of Israel recognizes that something is a little off here. I can't cure Namaan, he says. And then, Elisha, the prophet of whom the little girl spoke, invites Namaan to come to him. So off Namaan goes with his horses and chariots and silver and gold and 10 sets of clothing. 10 sets of clothing? Did I say that Namaan's been carrying around 10 sets of clothing? The man has leprosy and he's worried about how many suits he has? Some folks prefer a change of clothes, even 10 changes of clothes, to real rebirth. Change the music, add a few multicultural songs, change the pictures to add a few multicultural faces, form a committee (maybe that's just Lutherans?) but deep down the systemic disease persists. Well Namaan expects Elisha to be impressed when he makes such a commanding appearance. He expects Elisha to give him a big fancy reception, something to change into one of his 10 sets of clothes for. But Elisha is coolly unimpressed by all that pomp. Elisha simply sends a messenger to Namaan telling him that if he wants to be healed he should go down to the Jordan River, take off his expensive clothes and wash himself 7 times.

The General is outraged! The prophet has dissed him. Elisha should have come out personally and waved his hand over the spot to cure the leprosy, not send some loser messenger telling him to go wash in some river, some little old muddy Jordan river -

Why the distant rivers of Namaan's homeland were renowned for their crystal clear waters... Some folks, like

Namaan, prefer a distant river. Sometimes rebirth looks clearer from a distance. Sometimes it's easier to write a check and send it to help some ministry somewhere else then welcome our own neighbors with different backgrounds. Sometimes it's easier to send our youth on mission trips far away than work on racism and class prejudices in our own communities. Or is that just a Lutheran thing??? What the prophet asked Namaan to do was simple, just go down to the Jordan and wash. But "Are not Arbana and Pharpha, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Shall I not wash in them and be clean?" huffs Namaan. No says Elisha. You are not the general in this battle. You are not the strategist. You are not setting the agenda. You don't get to choose the location. In fact, you need a little dislocation, Naaman, you need to come down off your high horse! In order for Namaan to be released, revived and reborn, there need to be some reversals here from the one who brings the powerful down from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. That's why the servants are the ones giving the orders and urging Namaan to strip off his outer garments, including the layers of prideful resistance and reluctance, and go down naked to wash in the river.

So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan. You know..I believe that the healing began before Namaan even felt the Jordan's water caress his wounded body. I believe that the healing began as soon as he took those first hesitant, humbling steps towards the river. *So he went down and immersed himself ...*is that not what we are called to do...immerse ourselves in our communities, in the reality of our sisters and brothers, with all of the conflicts and confusion, the humbling recognition of our own ignorance at times and need for direction, the joys and disappointments, the injustices and the victories... thus Namaan went down and immersed himself...7 times.7 - the number of creation complete and whole, 7 the number of sabbath, 7 the number of jubilee, every 7 sabbaths. *So he went down and immersed himself seven times* in the Jordan and Namaan found his jubilee.

His flesh became clean once more like the flesh of a little child... Now Namaan is like a child. Namaan is reborn. Like the little girl, Namaan is now connected to the true source of power. Not power from the throne of Aram, but power bringing transformation and rebirth through connection with one who seemed to have nothing to offer, a child in poverty, a child who showed herself to be a mighty warrior resisting and rising above all the injustices that could have crushed her capacity to love but didn't.

That's about it...we're almost done...But you know, for me, there are still a few loose ends here in the story. What about the child's own freedom and future? Well, there's still some work to do. We're not finished yet. And as you go about your work in the days ahead, it is good to remember that to the extent that you connect yourselves with the child in this story, with those whom the world perceives as offering the least, you hold the power for rebirth in your church. You are not the beggars on the fringe. You are not the ones most at risk...you have the power for resistance and rebirth, not just for yourselves, but for your larger church, for our shared future.

The other loose end for me is that little girl's name. We still don't know it. But perhaps that's so we can locate her name around us. I found her in Danielle and it is with Danielle that I will conclude:

I wish some of the folks who work on Wall Street could sit at the table and have lunch with Danielle. Her mother, Deena, died from an asthma attack brought on by smoking crack. She's ten and has eleven sisters and brothers. Some are older and on their own, and some of them went to live with a relative down South. That left five parentless children in the home. An uncle, known to be a compulsive gambler, moved in. Rumor had it that his main interest was in using the children to get money for his habit. I don't know if that is true, but there's little affection or attention shown to the children at home, except what they offer each other, which is considerable. Three of the youngest were in our summer program.

One hot day when a swimming trip was planned for the afternoon. Danielle was brought to my office in tears. It turned out that she didn't own a bathing suit. We decided that it would be all right to skip the morning math lesson and go out to get a suit. The trip took us out over lunchtime, and so we stopped at a nearby McDonald's, where Danielle ordered a Happy Meal. She got up and came back with some extra napkins. Then she began divvying up the small bag of fries into five little piles, each on its own napkin. I asked her what she was doing. "My sisters and brothers will feel sad that I got french fries and they didn't," she explained "I'm taking them home to share." Sitting there in McDonald's with Danielle, I felt rich. (from *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*)

