

2 Kings 5:1-15

A Canadian woman named Jana Pruden decided this Halloween to offer children their choice of candy or a potato. She held out to trick-or-treaters a bowl of fun-size Reeses and Kit-Kats and so forth with a single potato nestled in the candy. Then she posted on Twitter as the evening progressed:

“A little girl just chose the potato ‘for my dad.’ I let her have a piece of candy too for being so cool.”

“Down two more potatoes.”

“Absolutely no deliberation with that girl. Just, ‘potato’ and grabbed it. Like there wasn’t even a choice to be made.”

“A father—of a toddler who was *seriously* torn between the potato and candy—said he heard a kid running down the street say, ‘I just got a potato!’ and then wasn’t sure if they should come to the house or not.”

“Teenage girl: ‘I want a potato!’”

“Rapidly running out of potatoes.”

“Also—as an aside—when did kids get so polite? Good work, parents, your children are lovely.”

“Three more potatoes gone.”

“One girl picked it, held it over her head like an upraised jewel, and yelled, “Potato!”

“I am down to two potatoes.”

“A little girl, given the choice between candy and a potato, thought for a moment, and then chose candy. When I told her she could take a second candy, she immediately chose the potato. She also told me they grew a carrot this summer ‘that looks like a bunny but also the devil.’”

“A child comes to the door. They say, ‘I don’t normally come back to a house twice. But could I please have another potato?’”

What are we to make of this? First of all, kudos to Jana Pruden for the brilliance of her idea. Just the picture of a potato nestled in a basket of Halloween candy makes my day. Second, although we think of candy as a special treat, when candy is expected, a potato becomes the novelty and even the preference. Third, potatoes are brown and lumpy, but they’re also substantial and nourishing, which is more than you can say for Kit-Kats. The child who took the potato for her father knew at some level that a potato is more valuable than a candy bar, and that this is the kind of wisdom dads understand. Her dad would get a potato for her because he loves her and

wants her to be healthy.

Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a guy who would go out expecting candy bars. Clearly packaging mattered to him. Look at the simplicity of the maidservant's offer, and how complicated Naaman makes it. She just says to his wife, "If he'd visit the prophet in Samaria that prophet would cure his skin condition." But Naaman talks it over with his boss, the king of Aram, and the king says, "I'll write a letter to my opposite number in Israel to smooth the way." Why are we involving kings? I guess because when you're requesting a miracle, you want to involve your most influential contacts.

The king of Aram also prepares some lavish gifts for the king of Israel, to dispose him more kindly toward Naaman—again, not that the king of Israel has *anything* to do with what the prophet in Samaria will or won't do. Talents of silver, shekels of gold, ten changes of clothes. The gift terrifies the king of Israel (and maybe that was the real motivation: like a gangster, throw down and challenge your opposite number to ante up **or else**). He feels put on the spot, and says, "I'm not God, I can't cure this skin condition! He's trying to pick a fight so he can attack me!"

Elisha the prophet, to whom Naaman should have gone directly without involving kings, sends the message that Naaman ought to report to him . . . which Naaman does, along with his horses and chariots, like he can't just come on his own. Elisha won't even come out to meet him, but sends word for Naaman to bathe in the Jordan.

This, too, is terribly pedestrian. Heroes are supposed to go on quests and do impossible things—slay the Minotaur, fetch a magic herb from a far-off mountain, collect 100 Philistine foreskins. What Elisha is implying is that Naaman is not a hero, and his quest is not a heroic

quest. He should go to the local river, which is not even as splendid as the ones back home. Naaman would have turned Elisha down flat if it hadn't been for his servants, who point out to him that he would have done something hard to achieve his goal, so why not do something easy? And in fact, that's what works. Bathing in the Jordan River cures his skin disease, and Naaman returns to Elisha's house to say, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.'

In this story, miracles are the province of nameless servants and cranky prophets. They are all but inaccessible by kings and generals. They take place at the local river, not at the "best" rivers known to people who've been around. If Naaman had followed only his instincts, he would never have gotten healed, because his instinct was to go where power was visible—to his king, to Israel's king, to the most splendid rivers. His ego stood in the way of his healing.

So I wonder if the full extent of Naaman's healing or transformation went beyond physical healing. He'd had to overcome his ego to cure his skin condition, and we know that he internalized the lesson because he ends up taking home a little bit of soil from Samaria so that he can worship the God of Israel when he gets back home. Elisha, the cranky prophet, had said that he would help Naaman so that the *king* would know that there was a prophet in Israel, implying that Israel's king was not real tuned in to the God of the covenant. Whether or not the Israelite king was properly impressed, Naaman certainly was. Maybe Naaman also continued to listen to servants, and to pay less attention to kings and their packaging. You know, the story begins by saying that Naaman was so successful "because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram." Even before Naaman was aware of God, God was aware of him and cared for him—so in a way it was inevitable that Naaman would learn more about this God of ordinary people.

I sort of love that Naaman disappears from the story after this; it's like an invitation to write some fan fiction about the rest of his life. Like a missionary or a computer virus, he carried his new orientation back to Aram, where perhaps he paid attention to ordinary soldiers and made sure their families got taken care of if anything happened to them. Or he looked at his wife's maidservant and realized that she had had a life before becoming a spoil of war, and he took her back home. All kinds of miracles can flow from the original one, after all.

I love Beggars' Night for lots of reasons, but one is that it's a simple ritual that provides a way for participants to inhabit an alternative identity and to move through a landscape made strange by darkness. Halloween disorients you just enough that you can temporarily live as someone else and see what that might be like. It makes room for miracles like the transformation of Naaman: A homeowner's burglar surveillance camera caught a child dressed as a superhero looking at the bowl of treats set out on the porch table and finding it empty. He set down his own bag, dug out some of his treats, and put them into the empty bowl. Then he left—having *fully inhabited* the identity of superhero. That's how I think of Naaman returning to Aram. A miracle had happened when he surrendered the identity of Mover and Shaker, and he would not fully inhabit that identity again.

I saw another picture of a group of boys, probably about 11 or 12, all dressed in suits and ties with dark glasses. Except one of them, who was just wearing a button-down shirt and tie. It turns out that one kid wasn't allowed to wear a costume, so his friends figured out a group costume: he was the President and they were Secret Service agents. Inhabiting a new identity—protector—that I bet they did not entirely shed when the night was over.

Halloween is a time when strangers come to our door—ugly, frightening, odd-looking,

beautiful—and we greet them warmly and give them gifts. It's really good practice for getting over ourselves, for welcoming the unexpected, for receiving miracles. I'm nervous about the election on Tuesday, and it's a sure bet that along with any good news there'll be bad news. Today's reading has me thinking that regardless of who holds office and exercises official (and real) power, miracles will come to ordinary people who have been practicing getting knocked off balance.

Healing God, when we play with shifting realities, it gives us a chance to be knocked off balance by your grace. Help us to stay in touch with the miraculousness of the ordinary, so that we may be transformed fully as you transformed Naaman, whose God you were even before he knew it. Amen.