

“Seriously? That’s it?”
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When I first read Peter Matthiessen’s 1979 memoir *The Snow Leopard*, I felt as if it were *my* feet sinking in the snow, slipping on the ice, as the author journeys through the Himalayas of Nepal in search of the Crystal Mountain and a possible glimpse of the rarely seen snow leopard. Peter’s wife has died of cancer. He himself is getting older, and he can’t remember how to live in the world anymore. He climbs one of the highest peaks on earth in search of meaning.

This is the land of the yeti and mythic prophets, of Buddhist monasteries and enlightenment, of the great Lama of Shey. And it is here that the snow leopard comes to represent to Peter “the very stuff of human longing.”

As I turned each page, getting closer and closer to the end, I was sure that he would finally see those yellow eyes, that “terrible beauty.” But Peter never sees a snow leopard.

In place of a mythic experience, his shabby tent leaks, his porters disappear and steal his stuff, he confronts profound poverty, his body aches, he gets lost, thinks he might die, and is delayed endlessly by weather. Toward the end of his book, he writes, “ ‘Expect nothing,’ Eido Roshi had warned on the day I left... Nor has anything changed; I am still beset by the same old lusts and ego and emotions, the endless nagging details and irritations—that aching gap between what I know and what I am. I have lost the flow of things and gone awry... For all the exhilaration, splendor, and ‘success’ of the journey to the Crystal Mountain, a great chance has been missed, and I have failed.”

I wonder: Did Naaman, in our Scripture passage this morning, think he too had failed?

For years his body has ached, his skin burned. For years he has lived with shame, shielding his face from the gaze of others, noting—or imagining—their repulsion. Now he’s heard about a prophet who can heal his skin disease. So he travels all the way from Aram in modern-day Syria, clad in his finest clothing, atop a glittering chariot, followed by a retinue of servants. He and his riches, however, are turned away from the king’s palace and diverted to a shack in the boonies. And there this prophet doesn’t even have the decency to come out and meet him. He’s just standing outside the door, in the hot sun, like a fool. When the door finally does open, it’s not Elisha the prophet standing before him; it’s a mere servant, who tells him some nonsense about bathing in the river.

Naaman shouts, “Seriously? That’s it? I thought you’d at least come out and wave your arms around!”

Naaman walks away, enraged and disappointed. He expected a great performance. He expected some difficult and legendary task to be asked of him. He expected to be treated with the dignity and ceremony due his rank and station.

And Naaman's not the only one who's been disappointed in God and God's people.

Instead of a passionate encounter with God, we Presbyterians offer you... committee meetings. Oooh...

We read these epic accounts in the Bible of miracles and revelations. We are told by countless sermons, songs, and books that we will be swept up in awe and wonder, that instead of jobs we will have callings, that we will awaken to life's deepest meanings and achieve peace of mind, that we will stand heroically against the forces of injustice and cruelty.

Instead, our lives remain largely unchanged, still captive to the same anxieties and bad habits and sins; our longings go unanswered; good people still suffer and die; the heavens fail to open; worship is still boring.

We look at reality, in light of what we thought our lives would be, and we too sometimes ask, "Seriously? Is this it?"

This is the same question posed by Peter Matthiessen to the Lama of Shey, a great Buddhist master whom Peter discovers to be a crippled monk who spends much of his time curing goat skin.

So, he asks the lama if he's sad that he can't use his legs, can't travel the country, see its beauty, and teach. Then, this holy man, his "big white teeth shining, laughs out loud... and casts his arms wide to the sky and the snow mountains, the high and dancing sheep, and cries, 'Of course I am happy here! It's wonderful!'"

And it's then that Peter understands. He had walked right past the monk, never thinking that he could be the lama. His grand expectations had blinded him to the simple miracle that was right in front of his face. Similarly, once he lets go of the need to see the snow leopard, he begins to see all the other beauties around him, little and mundane things he had underestimated. "I love the common miracles," he writes, "the murmur of my friends at evening, the clay fires of smudgy juniper, the coarse dull food, the hardship and simplicity, the contentment of doing one thing at a time."

Now, don't mistake me, Peter's not suddenly enlightened. He's still himself, still deals with all those nagging thoughts and self-doubts. But thinking upon all that he has seen and experienced, Peter exclaims, "It's quite enough! Have you seen the snow leopard? No! Isn't that wonderful?"

I imagine Elisha saying the same thing to Naaman: "You mean, God and life are not what you expected or wanted? Isn't that wonderful?"

I imagine Naaman, humbled and lectured by his own servants, stepping out of that great instrument of war, the chariot, painstakingly removing his armor and clothing, shedding his pride and all he thought God and he should be, standing naked before his subordinates, and then dipping his hurting body into the river. Just an ordinary man bathing in an ordinary river.

And this—this simple act, not his military might, not his wealth, not some grand and showy miracle, this everyday occurrence—is what heals him. This simple, mundane act.

Seriously? That's it? Yeah, that's it. And it's enough.

P'ang Chu-Shih once wrote, "How wondrously supernatural and miraculous! I draw water and I carry wood!"

How wondrously supernatural and miraculous! I am joined here by people who love me to serve an illiterate carpenter born in a barn to a teenage girl, a criminal who drank water with outcast women and talked with short tax collectors hanging out in trees.

God does not appear as we expect.

The things that truly change us, heal us, aren't the fleeting moments of glory, or the pleasures of entertaining worship, or the theatrics of revelation. They're the small, everyday occurrences that we so easily overlook and underestimate: the touch of hands passing the Communion cup, the song of a bird, the smile or tears of a friend, a good book, a walk at dusk, an old protest sign picked up again, a homeless man sleeping on the street, an affirmation of forgiveness, a story told long ago by the Hebrew people.

These are the rivers that God has sent us to. They'll seem mundane and not particularly special until you look at them right.

No theatrics, just a simple and subtle realization: I live, I love; it is enough. Thanks be to God!
Amen.