

My first cataract surgery went amazingly well; the second not so much.

Two years ago I had cataract surgery on my right eye. I had met with the doctor a few weeks earlier, and I liked her. She had a fine reputation. She answered all my questions, and we scheduled laser surgery.

On the day of the surgery, everything went as I expected. Barb and I arrived early in the morning at the hospital. There was the usual paperwork. I got one of those lovely open-backed hospital gowns to wear, and blankets while I waited in the preparation area. The staff gave me pills and a drip line for liquids to flow into veins in my left arm. My doctor came in briefly to say "Good Morning." I was drowsy when they wheeled me into the operating room at about 10:00 AM. And then I fell asleep.

When I woke up in recovery I had a small protective cap over my right eye. My doctor came in and said that all had gone well, and that I could go home. I was given a sheet of instructions; Barb drove me home. She bought eye drops at the pharmacy and I used them as instructed.

The next morning when I took off the eye protector I could not believe how clearly I could see! And the colors were so bright: beautiful blues of the sky and the green of the trees. It was wonderful, amazing! All had indeed gone well. I was very thankful.

We scheduled my second surgery for a Tuesday at the end of November. The procedures were similar to the first time: an early-morning ride to the hospital, paperwork, that lovely gown to wear, pills, drip line, helpful medical staff, brief greetings from my doctor, sleep, surgery, and recovery. It was a successful outcome.

Again I was so pleased and gratified at the results. I could now see distant objects quite well without my glasses for the first time since I was a child! All had gone as we had hoped.

Until Saturday morning, that is. I noticed spots and cloudiness in my newly operated left eye. I said, "I should call my doctor, but I know she is not in the office today." I called the emergency number my surgeon had given me, and talked to the doctor who was covering weekend problems. "You should be seen today," I was told. "It is urgent!" So in the early afternoon Barb drove me to the emergency facility.

We dealt with parking and found the Ophthalmology suite. I was seen by a young woman doctor. She was kind and thoughtful and professional; obviously a well-trained resident. She looked in my eye, and said, "I think you have an infection; I want to consult with one of my colleagues. He is a retina specialist."

It seemed like a long time until her colleague came in. He was also very young, perhaps in his early thirties. He was somewhat abrupt in his approach, focused on his careful examination of what he saw inside my eye. "Yes," he said, "you have an infection, and we need to treat it right away."

This was unexpected and unwelcome news. Now I was faced with a choice. Would I trust this young resident to do a potentially painful procedure to my eye now, or would I insist on waiting until Monday, when I could see my doctor who had done the surgery? Both young doctors had said that the infection could cause permanent damage to my vision.

I thought about it and considered the fact that they were well-trained and responsible for patients in that department on the weekend. I decided that I could trust them. So I said, "Go ahead. Do what you need to do." And they did. The procedure was not pleasant, and we had to come back on Sunday to see the young retina doctor again. On Monday we saw this young

retina specialist's supervisor as well as my surgeon. Both assured me that the infection was beginning to clear up. The young doctors had done the right thing. I seem to have suffered no permanent damage to my vision because the infection was treated immediately.

Now let us go back in time about 2800 years, and from Massachusetts to Samaria, in Northern Israel, and to the ancient city of Damascus. Here is the story of another unexpected healing.

As was frequently the case, the armies of Aram, to the northeast of Israel in what is now Syria, would conduct military raids into Samaria. One of the War Lords of the Aramean army was a man by the name of Naaman.

In that day, when a village, town or city was attacked by a foreign army, civilians were captured and taken back to the homeland from which the army came. There they were enslaved and made to serve the leading citizens of the victorious nation.

On one such raid, a young girl was captured and taken back to Damascus. She was brought to the home of General Naaman as a slave to his wife. Here the story becomes complicated.

General Naaman had a skin disease – not leprosy as is described in the New Testament – but nevertheless a troubling skin disease for which he sought a cure. The young captive girl from Samaria, wanting to be helpful, said to Naaman's wife, "If only the General were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

Naaman's wife passed this information on to her husband. Now here is a strange thing about this story. General Naaman was a powerful man, a warrior held in high regard. He had led military exercises; he had fought wars; he had captured people and enslaved people, like the young girl who served his wife. Yet he had the kind of relationships with his servants that they cared for him. They cared enough to risk speaking up to help him when he needed help. Naaman was not all evil, nor was he entirely virtuous. Like all of us here he was a mixture of bad and good, a man who had done some terrible things yet one who was valued. People who knew him respected and cared for him.

So Naaman went off to see his king and ask for permission to go see the prophet in Israel in order to be cured. The king gave his permission, and a gift for the king of Israel was prepared: a generous gift of silver, gold, and new clothing. Naaman gathered his retinue of soldiers, horses and chariots and he traveled to Israel along with his servants. He went with his gifts and a letter to the king of Israel. The letter said, "I have sent you my servant, Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." The king thought that this General Naaman had come to start a war with him on the pretense that Naaman's king expected him to cure his leprosy. The king of Israel tore his own clothing as a sign of his distress. "Am I God, that this king wants me to cure a man of leprosy? He wants to pick a quarrel with me!"

The prophet Elisha heard of the king's distress, and he sent a message saying, "Send General Naaman to me; he will learn that there is a prophet of God in Israel." And so Naaman and his horses and chariots, his bodyguards and his servants went to Elisha's home.

Now General Naaman expected certain conventions to be followed. He expected that the prophet Elisha would come out of his home and greet him, bowing low as a sign of respect. He expected that he would be invited in and served refreshments. Polite words would be exchanged, and then Naaman's skin problem would be discussed. The prophet would call on the name of his God and wave his hand over the diseased area and he would be cured. Then Naaman would present Elisha with a generous gift. That was what Naaman expected.

But it did not happen that way. Instead, the prophet Elisha did not even appear! He sent out a messenger who said, “Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

General Naaman was a proud man, and he felt unsettled and insulted. And then he felt angry! This was not the treatment that he expected. He said to his servants, “Are not the rivers in Damascus better than all the rivers in Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage.

Then, carefully, his servants approached him. “Father,” they said. (This was a term of respect.) “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash and be clean’?”

So Naaman, the great General Naaman, humbled himself and went down to the Jordan River. There he immersed himself seven times in those healing waters, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

He was so grateful for his healing! Naaman went back to the home of Elisha the prophet, and he said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

Healing is a process; it is not just one thing. It involves the body, mind and spirit. So I have a question for you. When did the healing actually take place for Naaman? I think it began when he took seriously the sincere concern of the young enslaved girl from Samaria who served his wife. Then he asked for time off to go visit a healer, a foreigner who had a different religion! Then his cure continued when he decided to swallow his pride and listen to the reasoning of his servants as they persuaded him to trust the advice of the prophet Elisha and go wash in the Jordan River seven times. And I think his restoration was complete when he recognized that it was God who had healed him.

The healing of my left eye included a trusted and skilled eye surgeon, medicine, surgery, advice which I heeded – even from young doctors – prayer, patient waiting, gratitude, and a recognition of the Holy One in all of this. And the healing in my eye still continues.

When does healing take place for you? I think it begins when we are able to take the advice of those who care about us. I believe that healing continues when we put aside our expectations and our pride, and when we are willing to take a risk for the sake of our health. We don’t have prophets like Elisha, but we have highly trained medical professionals, and it is important to follow their advice. Oftentimes that advice is quite simple: get your flu shot, wash your hands, eat a healthy diet, get regular exercise, and get a good night’s sleep -- all of these are vital to health of body, mind and spirit. Allow yourself to feel deep gratitude for the whole process of healing! And when you are able to see the hand of God in the unexpected healing process – that is indeed a blessing!

This sermon by Pastor Lawrence R. Bergstresser was preached at Hillside Community Church, Medford, MA on November 4, 2018.