

## May 3, 2020 – Online/Remote Worship Service

### **“Secondary Characters”**

There is a lot of action in the story of the healing of Naaman:  
a deadly disease striking down a great military commander,  
a desperate journey,  
a miraculous healing.  
Lots of drama, too:  
big personalities, powerful men;  
a whole spectrum of emotional ups and downs.  
Loud voices...but the most important voice is the quietest one.

Aside from kings and generals,  
there is Elisha,  
the prophet who followed Elijah  
and has become well-respected in his own right,  
but who speaks entirely from off-stage  
in this part of the drama.

There are also some servants who travel with Naaman,  
who encourage him to check his anger  
and maybe his ego.

But the voice that has the least authority or power to speak,  
the voice that starts the story,  
that makes the story happen at all,  
is the servant girl.  
Although our Bible reading softens it a bit,  
this young girl was captured in Israel during a raid,  
and enslaved.

Taken from her home, her family, her culture,  
she was brought into Syria by Naaman's forces  
and given to his wife.  
She is young; she is far from home;  
she is immersed in a culture very different from Israel;  
she has no independence or freedom;  
she is vulnerable to her owners.

And yet...  
she is able to speak to her mistress of the prophet back home  
who would be able to cure Naaman's leprosy.

Let's pause for a moment  
 and imagine how badly that could have gone.  
 Her mistress could have simply dismissed the idea.  
 Or become angry at her slave for speaking out of turn.  
 Or we could imagine a different ending  
 to Naaman's story, one where he is not healed.  
 Things might have gone very badly for this Israelite girl when her master got home after a long,  
 expensive and disappointing journey.

But speak she did, and Naaman went to his king to ask if he ought to go.  
 The Syrian king not only agrees,  
 but funds the trip and writes him a letter of introduction.  
 This letter scared the daylights out of the king of Israel,  
 because how was he supposed to cure Naaman  
 of leprosy?  
 Israel's king was sure that this letter  
 was a ploy to pick a fight.

Elisha hears of the king's panic,  
 and in what amounts to a written eyeroll,  
 he tells the king to send Naaman to him.  
 Naaman and his entourage proceed to Elisha's house.  
 But Elisha doesn't even come out to see him;  
 he sends out a messenger  
 instructing Naaman to wash himself  
 seven times in the Jordan river  
 to be healed.

Naaman does not take this advice well.  
 It sounds like he was expecting a bit more effort,  
 some dramatic calling on God  
 and some handwaving to make this miracle happen.

And he was not impressed about being told to dip himself in Israel's river;  
 if some baths were all that were needed,  
 why not the familiar waters of Syria's rivers,  
 rather than this foreign stream?

Naaman very nearly stormed off,  
 but some of his servants talked him down:  
 if it's only this small and easy thing that needs doing, just try it.  
 See what happens.  
 So Naaman did,

and of course, he is fully cleansed and healed,  
with skin that like that of a young boy again.

The main characters in this story  
– the large-and-in-charge kings and generals –  
have absolutely no idea what's going on.  
For such powerful men,  
they all come off looking a bit silly.

The Syrian king  
who lacked awareness about the effect his letter  
demanding a cure might have;  
the Israelite king, prone to panic;  
and Naaman,  
the big man who's a big deal in Syria,  
but whose ego and temper  
nearly send him away  
from the cure he needs.

When it comes to the large-and-in-charge today,  
we have certain expectations, or at least,  
we hope that they will know what they are doing.

Politicians these days can be a little hit-and-miss.  
But the qualities of power, authority,  
leadership and knowledge  
are often lumped together in our minds.  
We look at the CEO of a big company  
and expect that power and wealth  
came about for them  
because of their knowledge,  
their work ethic,  
their leadership skills.

We look at a surgeon,  
and assume that their authority, position and know-how  
are a result of them knowing how!  
When there is a tragedy or need in society,  
we expect those with power,  
with influence and wealth  
to step up;  
to donate money,  
or increase awareness...  
to know what to do,

and to do it.  
That's how the world works.

But it is not the way God works.  
We do not need to be wealthy or powerful,  
in charge of a big company, with a hard-won skillset,  
political office or a million followers on YouTube  
to do what God needs us to do.

Sometimes, though, we Christians  
can get caught up in the world's ideas  
about what constitutes a good act;  
we think we need to go big or go home,  
that God wants the big gestures and drama.

Otherwise, we're low-balling it as Christians.  
It's the difference between a big dramatic gesture  
– a powerful man invoking God and waving his hands around –  
versus a small, quiet act  
– a slave girl speaking from her faith  
to help a hurting man.  
God turns the world's logic on its ear.  
A foreign slave girl was the lowest of the low,  
a non-person in the ancient world.  
The society she found herself in did not value people like her,  
and yet she is able to witness and speak  
to the power and presence of God.

She is able to do this without power, authority, influence or wealth;  
without the perfect skillset, or any specialised knowledge.  
What she does know,  
she knows because she is one of God's chosen people.  
She knows that her God,  
the God that Elisha serves,  
is reliable and compassionate.

She knows too,  
or at least she trusts,  
that her God  
is not some tribal god,  
interested only in Israel;  
God's mercy and compassion and love

extend across all borders and boundaries.

The slave girl did not see culture, religion, or social status  
as an insurmountable wall between people.

And so she reached out  
from a position of weakness and vulnerability  
across religious and social boundaries  
to share the healing and saving presence  
of God.

Put like that, it sounds huge.

Like a great act,

A big, drama-worthy, world-changing gesture.

But all she did was speak,

inspired by her faith

and her identity as a child of God.

Naaman is healed

because a slave girl was brave enough

to hang on to her faith in a foreign household

and to be true to her faith by helping another.

Naaman is healed

because God is compassionate

across any boundary or wall we might think to build between us,

and because God takes great pleasure

in using small, humble things

– like baths and little girls –

to do the impossible.

But we can't be too hard on Naaman himself.

Something was driving him to seek help

from a culture and a religion utterly foreign to his own;

to listen to the advice of a slave girl.

And while it might have been arrogance and ego,

I suspect that it was really fear and desperation.

His skin condition was almost certainly leprosy,

and that was a life-destroying and life-ending condition.

So it's reasonable to suppose that his anger at

Elisha refusing to even speak to him directly

was as much a product of fear

and profound disappointment

as it was genuine anger.

Imagine being dangerously ill  
 and finally getting that all-important specialist appointment in Toronto.  
 You arrange the trip, find someone to go with you,  
 maybe book an expensive downtown hotel room,  
 and the specialist sends his administrative assistant  
 to the parking lot  
 to tell you to go take baths in Lake Ontario!

Haven't we got a nicer, cleaner lake here at home?  
 Isn't he even going to take a look at me?  
 Baffled, hurt,  
 hopes dashed,  
 disbelieving, angry,  
 ready to get in the car and go home...  
 how would you feel?  
 But Naaman ultimately listens  
 and yes, is humbled,  
 and also healed.  
 Remember that God isn't just interested in healing our bodies;  
 he wants to heal, to save, every part of us.  
 Perhaps the humility,  
 the recognition that a great and powerful God  
 acts through the small, the humble and the vulnerable,  
 was part of Naaman's healing too.

I'd like to end with this:  
 whether we are among the large-and-in-charge of the world or not,  
 God calls us and empowers us  
 to participate in his work in the world.

The limitations on our ability to participate  
 in his redeeming, saving work,  
 To witness, to show others the way  
 to healing and wholeness and hope,  
 Those limitations exist  
 because we invent them,  
 we believe in them...  
 ...not because God has made  
 sharing our faith  
 impossible for us.

Where the slave girl acts from is important;

by all worldly wisdom, she is in a vulnerable position.  
Embedded in a foreign culture and religious tradition,  
situated within a household  
where everyone is more important than her;  
everyone has more freedom to speak,  
more power and capacity to act.

But she carried her faith with her.  
We can carry our faith with us, too.

Our situation is not so dire, so fearful as the slave girl's was;  
But our circumstances have changed dramatically these past months,  
And it's important to acknowledge that how we share our faith,  
how we as a community, point to God, has changed.

But we still have our voices, just like the slave girl,  
And there are still frightened, desperate men and women  
Seeking hope and help and wholeness, just like Namaan.  
We can still act in small, but powerful,  
humble, but imaginative ways  
to share our faith with others.

God does not always and only demand great acts of us;  
it is who we are – children of God – that matters,  
not how much freedom of movement or influence or power we have.  
What God demands  
is a growing faith and a fearless love,  
and he will work through our small acts  
to make his power and presence  
known to all.  
Thanks be to God!  
AMEN.