

Today's story from II Kings 5 seems in some ways an alien story: social customs & values of the time, the belief in miraculous powers of prophets are far from our everyday life. Yet the basic point of today's story -- that God works through specific people in order to bring wholeness of life, not only to those who belong to the community but also to outsiders-- is familiar to us when we reflect on Jesus in his ministry accepting & healing tax collectors, sinners, Roman soldiers.

And in the words and deeds of the characters in today's story, we may recognize our neighbour, maybe even ourselves.

Let's take a closer look at the story.

It opens with Naaman, commander of army of Syria. [Syria or Aram at this time is clearly more powerful than Israel. Naaman would be roughly equivalent of a today's theater commander -- think of General David Petraeus for the US in Afghanistan today.] Naaman suffers from leprosy, a generic term for different kinds of skin diseases. He is the senior military officer, highly valued by his king, successful, aware of own importance, and, as we later discover, a man proud of his status and of his country.

There are three significant interventions in the story. In the first, an unnamed Israelite servant girl, who had been captured on a raid and assigned to Naaman's wife, tells her mistress that the prophet in Samaria, Elisha, could cure Naaman's leprosy.

Naaman gets the okay from his king, who sends him with a letter of introduction & really expensive gifts, presumably to pay the prophet.

The King of Israel, when he receives word of the request from his counterpart in Syria, seems to be a man caught in the middle, out on limb well beyond his competence. He is fearful, suspicious. He rents his clothes and despairs of the situation, fearing that the Syrian King is in effect picking a fight, making an impossible request, perhaps as a pretext for waging war.

In the second intervention in the story, we meet Elisha the prophet. Hearing of the king's situation, he comes to the rescue.

What kind of man is Elisha? His invitation, 'Let [Naaman] come to me now, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel,' indicate that he is an utterly self confident, 'make my day' kind of person: sure of himself, yet not in it for himself -- he refuses any reward from Naaman.

Elisha in other stories in II Kings is a high profile, strange, complicated man of action: he parts the waters of Jordan River, heals a corrupted spring at Jericho, comes to the rescue of a widow being hounded by her creditors, resuscitates a child who has died from sunstroke, causes a lost axe head to float up on water so it can be found, strikes a Syrian raiding party blind & then causes them to regain their sight, and, when annoyed by bunch of unruly kids who are taunting Elisha, sickens two she-bears on them who eat the children, thus giving Elisha's some peace.

Back to the story -- As Naaman approaches, Elisha doesn't even go out to meet him directly -- he sends word out to simply 'Go & wash in Jordan seven times' Why is Elisha so dismissive? Is it because Naaman is a mere Aramean, a foreigner in Elisha's eyes? Naaman has come several hundred miles to meet the prophet and receive his cure. Is Elisha saying 'I have more important things to do than go & say hello?' [In any case, Elisha would make a poor Canadian -- too arrogant, not polite enough at all].

Naaman is enraged by this inappropriately casual treatment: he *knows* what to expect. It goes without saying in his mind that there is a definite way a healing should happen – there is a personal greeting followed by an invocation of the name of the God of Israel, and then a ritual healing. For him, this is part of a fixed horizon: this is the way things happen, the way things are.

And wash in the Jordan? There are better rivers in his homeland from which he has just made this journey. We can understand, perhaps sympathize with Naaman's national pride.

The third intervention in today's story comes from some unnamed servants in Naaman's retinue. They reason with Naaman: they say, in effect, 'Hey boss, maybe you're wrong. Why not take a chance and do what Elisha suggests?' Naaman relents, and goes then to wash in the Jordan, and is healed. In the sequel, Naaman is converted: "Behold I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel." He refuses payment, and asks for two mules' load of earth, to sacrifice to the God of Israel when he has returned home.

What can we take away from this ancient story? As we have seen, there are three interventions which make possible Naaman's cure. Elisha of course is the central intervening character. But there are also two unnamed parties without whom it would not have happened: the servant girl at the beginning of the story and Naaman's attending servants at the end.

The young Israelite servant girl acts, apparently, simply out of goodness of her heart. She has been captured, removed from her home and treated in effect as property. Yet she responds to Naaman's situation not with a sullen silence but with spontaneous generosity. And then there are Naaman's servants. It takes some courage to tell the emperor he has no clothes on, to contradict the boss. Yet they do – and their reasonable suggestions bear fruit for their commander.

The servant girl and Naaman's servants are ordinary folks. *They could have kept quiet.* But they didn't. Does this suggest a role that you and I may play when the occasion arises – the role of generosity, of a bold and helpful word when silence might be easier or more comfortable?

The story, finally, reminds us of the 'So Often Unexpectedness' of grace. Yes, bad things, terrible things happen at times in our lives. [Personally, I believe that randomness, chance, plays a real role in life.] And, like Naaman, we 'know' how things *should* happen; we frame our problems & their solutions in our own minds. But then, out of the blue, God's grace – more than we can ask or imagine – may happily interrupt our little, private worlds, our commonsense expectations, our traditional wisdom. And in a way that we neither could have predicted, nor can control, nor deserve, nor can even begin to understand, grace happens.