2 Kings 5:1-15

Traditional Christian appropriation of the Hebrew scriptures often flattens them. Stories become precursors of later New Testament events rather than genuine events in themselves. Vivid multidimensional characters become mere prefiguration instead of figures in their own right, and complex narrative situations are reduced to a single theological point. This is due in part to the allegorization of the Hebrew Bible that began with Paul and continued to flourish for centuries. For example, every element of the Exodus – the manna in the wilderness, the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, the rock which released streams of fresh water – all were commonly interpreted to mean "Christ." Likewise, when Namaan the Syrian emerges from the Jordan cleansed of his skin ailment, we are supposed to understand that the river's healing waters *really* signify grace in general and the sacrament of baptism in particular.

Maybe. But look at what is lost to these narratives – almost everything! The Exodus, given its historic importance and the immensity of its claim upon the imagination, has been able to resist the forces of well-meaning theological reduction. But what about Naaman, a minor figure tucked away in the ancient history of the Northern Kingdom. What chance does he have to survive death by allegory? Well, let's see.

Once upon a time there was a very important Aramaean general named Naaman. He was highly favoured by the king of the land and was in

everyone's eyes a great man, because YHWH had given him many victories in battle, even over the forces of Israel. Of course, for a general, battle victories are necessary if one is to be prized and honoured. Naaman's chest was covered by medals and ribbons; he lived in a grand house, given to him by a grateful people; he and his wife belonged to all the right clubs; he spoke in front of sparkling audiences. Everyone knew Naaman, and everyone respected him.

But, he did have a problem, he had leprosy or some sort of skin disease. Well, it was not the sort of leprosy or skin disease where your fingers and toes withered and rotted off, but it was bad enough. It was an unsightly sort of skin condition. Those who met him for the first time could not stop staring at his pockmarked face, try though they might. He was terribly embarrassed and self-conscious. His big house, and fine military reputation, and fancy club memberships just did not compensate for his depressed and agonizing looks in his mirror each day. His wife loved him, and never mentioned his obvious affliction, but he knew, he just knew, that even she cringed a little each time he approached her for a kiss or a hug.

But he did have his battles; at least there, in the heat of combat, none of his troops cared at all about his pitted face. He was their general, and he led them to victory again and again. On one of these raids against the Israelites, a rather pathetic mountain people from the west, little known for military prowess, Naaman had captured a tiny Israelite girl and had

given her to his wife as a servant. And she was a very good and helpful servant, before long making herself indispensable and becoming more of a friend to Mrs. Naaman than a slave. The girl was quick and very observant; it took her no time at all to see that Naaman's skin disease was a source of real contention in his public life that might soon spill over into his more intimate relationships, even with his loving wife.

So one day she approached her mistress and announced, "If only your husband were with the prophet who lives in Samaria (capital of the norther kingdom of Israel)! Why, it would take that man no time at all to rid my master of that nasty leprosy."

The Israelite slave girl in Naaman's household offers what is likely to be the only possible hope for a cure for Naaman. There is a prophet in Samaria who could cure the disease. The prophet is Elisha, who is the successor of Elijah, the champion of Yahweh and fierce opponent of the worship of other gods, including the gods of Aram.

Help comes from a slave, who is also female. She represents a nation which Naaman's armies have defeated in the past. So, Naaman will have to overcome his pride and arrogance and go 'cap in hand' to ask Elisha to cure his disease.

That very night, Naaman's wife mentioned the conversation with the servant girl to her husband. After all, she would be very happy to clear

up her beloved's unsightly blemishes as much as he would. Naaman, not the type of man to sit idly by, had likely tried everything that his significant resources permitted. He must have been desperate if he was willing to take advice from his wife's Israelite maid. She was the lowest of the low in terms of status; she was part of the spoils of war, a servant, a foreigner, a woman, and young. Naaman's willingness to act on this young woman's advice, signals his vulnerability – a powerful man looking to the powerless for help.

The next day, at his weekly meeting with the king of Aram, Naaman mentions the girl's boast about the Samaritan prophet. The king – he too would be glad to not look at his general's face such as it was – immediately allowed Naaman to head to Samaria to see if a cure could be had. Just to make the trip safer, and to ease any fears that the Israelite king may have had about a possible attack from the Arameans, the king said to his general, "I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

The background to this intriguing story is the history of conflict between Israel and Syria (Aram). The conflictual relationship made it difficult to conduct normal human affairs, especially those involving officials of the two nations. Added to that was the entrenched concept of male "honour" which prevailed in the ancient Middle East. The "honour" system required the implementation of diplomatic "face-saving" techniques in dealings with officials of the other group. The fact that the king of Aram is willing to ask for help from the king of Israel on behalf of Naaman indicates the high

regard in which the general is held.

So Naaman headed west, but not before he had gathered an impressively vast retinue to accompany him: ten talents of silver, a huge sum; six thousand shekels of gold, an enormous pile of gold; and ten sets of rich and costly garments. No general should ever go anywhere without the physical announcement that he was no ordinary travelling citizen. No! This was general Naaman, the feared conqueror of huge swaths of the Middle East. Look upon me and tremble, shouted the silver and gold. He marched into Samaria and went straight to the palace of the king, handing the monarch, who was none too pleased to welcome the general back into his land so soon after he had once again raided the king's territory.

The letter from the king of Aram said, "When you read this, know that I, the king, have sent my servant general to you that you may cure him of his skin disease."

The king of Israel is justifiably terrified. He knows he is not capable of such healing, yet does not wish to offend the powerful king of Aram. He tears his clothes in preparation for mourning for the calamity which is sure to descend upon him and his nation as he wails, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure someone of leprosy? Surely, this wily king is doing nothing less than finding a way to pick a fight. Once I fail to effect the cure, which I certainly will do, the Arameans

will fall on me and my kingdom, claiming that I did not do what was asked of me. Surely they know I cannot cure anyone! What am I to do?"

Naaman stood quietly before this whining king, perhaps thinking, "Why in the world have I wasted my time by coming all this way to witness the ravings of a nincompoop?"

Fortunately, his distress is communicated to Elisha, who suggests that Naaman be sent to him 'that he may learn there is a prophet in Israel.' In other words – a true prophet of the true God. This king was forever tearing his clothes in the face of potential catastrophe, rather than using the brain that YHWH had given him.

This is the beginning of a series of 'come-downs' for Naaman. He is sent from the royal court to the humble abode of the prophet. When he arrives he expects to remain outside on his horse, with his entourage, his chariots, not to mention the silver, gold, and fancy clothes, as he waits for this prophet to come and pay him the honour he has come to expect. So the great general waits for the man of magic power to come and cleanse him of his disease.

Instead, out from the pathetic little house, not at all like the Aramean house of general Naaman, appears not Elisha, the prophet, but a poorly dressed, ill-speaking servant, wiping his hands on a filthy dish towel. The tiny man looked up directly into the eyes of the general, seated on his

finest horse, and muttered, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times; your flesh shall be restored and you will be clean.”

Naaman is overcome with anger! “Who does this pipsqueak think that he is? How dare he speak to me in such a way! I thought that for me, general Naaman – scourge of my enemies, first among my own people – that this so-called prophet would deign to come out of his hovel, stand in front of me, call upon the name of YHWH his God, would wave his hand over my scarred face, maybe utter a spell or two in an ancient tongue, and thereby cure my leprosy.

But, no! I am commanded by a slave, no less, to dip my magnificent body into the muddy Jordan River, which is more creek than river. Our great rivers of Aram are far superior to that bog. I could have just stayed home and dipped in Abana or Pharpar and been made clean!”

Poor Naaman cannot take this. He had pictured himself instantly cured as the prophet waved his hand over him. He also resists the idea that a river of Israel might have more curative properties than rivers in his own Syria. None of it is happening the way he, a man of his station in life expected. And with that, the mighty Naaman turned his steed around and headed east toward home.

Once again, the advice of humble servants turns out to be the wisest: “Father (they clearly had a very intimate relationship with their general),

if this prophet had asked you to do something hard in order to find a cure, would you not have done it; stand on one foot for a day or recite the sacred texts of Aram backward? It is only a quick wash in a small body of water; why not? What do you have to lose?" We are not told what goes on in Naaman's heart and mind, or what pride he has to swallow, or how filthy the Jordan actually is on that particular day. All we know is that Naaman descends into the waters seven times, sees his leprous skin "restored like the flesh of a young boy," acknowledges the full authority of Israel's God and, to ensure that he can render proper thanks to the Lord when he returns to Damascus, gets permission from Elisha to bring back two mule loads of local soil – a piece of Israel upon which to give thanks to the one who washed him clean.

But the story is not simply one about humility and healing going hand in hand, as if God is waiting for this prominent man to eat humble pie. It is about the surprising and unexpected way of God in the world and our openness to that way. It is about our expectation being undone as we engage with a God who does the unexpected. And above all, it is about the healing being totally a gift of God, neither initiated nor controlled by human action.

Is it not interesting that in this ancient tale, all the great men are fools, while the servants pipe the tune? Both kings misconstrue the simple problem of a man's disease, the king of Aram demanding the cure be made by his royal Israelite counterpart, when the servant girl clearly

stated that only the prophet could do such a thing. And the Israelite king, seemingly unaware of the great prophet in his own city, in response to the Aramean letter performs outlandish actions of the deepest mourning, convinced that the Arameans are using Naaman's leprosy as a ruse to provoke war.

And Naaman himself, playing the part of the puffed-up great man, refuses to perform the tiniest request that could lead to his cleansing. The servant girl starts the story, the servant of Elisha delivers the command, and the servants of Naaman save the day, urging their arrogant master to do what he must to find a cure. In this story, the cleansing actions of God are found in the unlikeliest of places.

Is it possible that even we tend to look for God in all the wrong places? After all, while Caesar Augustus, whose doings were always on page one, ruled the known world, while Quirinius, the Syrian governor whose doings were always to be discovered in the pages of the local section, controlled the vast Roman Empire east, and a little pregnant, unmarried teenager was about to give birth to history's most significant baby. Her action found no place in any paper of that day. Yet, two billion of the world's people now revere this child as saviour and Lord. In whom do we find God acting today? Are we looking for God in too many wrong places?

Today is a good day to remember the little people, the ordinary people, the saints who have been messengers in our lives, the people who

brought truth, healing, or wisdom to us during their lives. We all have exceptional and often surprising guides in our lives: friends, family, neighbours, co-workers, someone we share a class with, or volunteer with. There are many people in our lives whom we may overlook, who bring wisdom to our lives – if only we are open to listen.

So what is this story about?
Pride needs to go before a cleansing? Yes.
Politicians often do not know what they are doing? Yes.
Prophets have enormous power? Of course.
But, perhaps it is about hearing and listening to those who have little power. Those of us with great power have to open our ears wider to listen to those we do not readily hear. Without the servants, the little girl, the prophet's messenger, the general's slaves, Naaman would still be diseased and Israel and Aram would once again be at war. There is wisdom in low places, and we who are high need to listen to what they have to say. Perhaps it is the voices in the low places that have the wisdom and capacity to bring peace and justice to our world.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Healing God, you healed your servant Naaman of his affliction when he came to you, through Elisha, for help. Heal our afflictions, and make us faithful servants. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Healer and Saviour. **Amen.**