

The Unnamed Voices
2 Kings 5:1-17
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Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.

He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "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 he went down and

immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!” He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, “If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Sometimes when you read a story, the unnamed characters are just as important as the named characters. This is especially true when you read the Bible. Who are the characters that are unnamed? The missing characters? See if you notice as I tell the story again.

Naaman was very rich and very powerful. He was a great warrior and successfully raided and attacked Israel with impunity. But his money and his power and his strength could not stop him from getting a serious skin disease. He had tried every single possible solution for healing. He had the resources to bring in specialists and herbalists and magicians, trying every tincture and remedy he was given. But his skin disease persisted.

In his desperation, his wife hears from a slave girl that there is a prophet in Israel who could cure him. This desperation listens to this little girl, this slave stolen from her family and forced to work in a foreign land. Picture the contrast between Naaman, rich and powerful, and this little slave girl. The two could not be more different. But her words give him a chance at life.

Now he has a few issues. He wants to pursue healing but it means going into enemy land. So he goes to his king, the King of Aram, and asks for his permission. Naaman must have been quite important because the king sends him to the enemy, the King of Israel, with a note and lots of treasure and horses and chariots. The King of Israel panics, “what sort of trap is this, that my enemy would come to me and ask for me to perform an impossible task?!?”

And here we finally have the first sight of the prophet, Elisha. Elisha hears that the King of Israel is upset and decides to take on this case so that Naaman might learn that there is a prophet in Israel and that their God was the true God. But Elisha is not going to play into the political and cultural power games. Naaman comes with horses and chariots and money expecting a grand entrance, expecting to be treated like a celebrity. So Elisha sends his servant and asks Naaman to do something rather silly to receive his healing.

Naaman, the rich and powerful and prideful warrior, has had enough. He did not come all the way to his enemy Israel just to be snubbed by this so called prophet. No way is he going to wash in the Jordan especially when he has such great rivers back in his land. He has been humiliated enough.

But this time the words of wisdom and healing come from his servants, urging him to reconsider. One thing to be said about Naaman is that even though he is rich and powerful and has his pride, it has not gotten in the way of him listening to someone “beneath” his station. Naaman goes and washes in the Jordan, I mean what is the worst that could happen, but when he arises, the skin disease is gone. He is healed. This humiliating trek and act have ended in healing and wholeness.

Naaman immediately goes to Elisha to thank him, this time approaching him humbly rather than full of pride. Naaman has learned about the true God, the God of Israel, the God who so often works in the humble and the least and the unnamed. Naaman wants to give Elisha an offering, not buying his healing, but thanking God for his healing. Once again Elisha refuses payment. Naaman having learned his lesson asks for something unusual, he asks for two mule-loads of dirt. When previously the Jordan water was not good enough for him, now he wants the dirt from the land of God’s people to worship on.

Naaman the rich and powerful has gone through an incredible transformation in this story. He went from sick to well. He went from proud to humble. He went from unbelieving to wanting to take a bunch of dirt home with him. But all of this would have been impossible without those unnamed characters I mentioned at the beginning. Did you catch them? The young, Israelite, slave girl who tells Naaman’s wife about the prophet of Israel or the servants who stopped him from backing out of the prophet’s instructions. This story is filled with powerful

characters, kings and prophets and mighty warriors. But without these persistent and faithful voices the story would never have happened.

We never know what part we are going to play in someone else's story. You never know how your words are going to affect someone's life. The unnamed Israelite girl and the unnamed slaves both offered important words of healing and wisdom. Even though their names are not remembered. Even though this story does not focus on them. They are absolutely essential.

Do not discredit your voice or your power. Just because you do not see movement or action or change, your voice and your actions still matters. You may be providing a link in the chain that will have wonderful consequences down the road. You may not see that future so all you can do is be faithful. Be faithful in sharing good news, in encouraging wisdom, in supporting the lost and weary because that is so often where our God is working.

Our God is one who works in mysterious ways and so often these little planted seeds come to fruition much later. We are not in control of others stories but that does not mean that we lose hope or discontinue the good work we have been called to. I know that this is not always the answer we want. We want to be the Elisha and to see the change and make people better immediately. But most of us are not Elisha, we have only been tasked with being faithful with what we have been given. For the rest, we live in hope that God is bringing those seeds to fruition because our God is a good and healing God.

Amen.