

Pentecost 6C 4th July, 2010
2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-12, 17-24
God's "Little People"

Do you ever feel very ordinary; just plain simply ordinary? In your journey of faith, God hasn't called you to something particular – you know you're not called to the ordained life, you know you're not called to be a missionary, at home or overseas; or to be an evangelist, or a social justice worker. And when your priest takes the lectern and challenges you to hear what God is calling you to; challenges you to listen, or try to listen, to God's voice in your life andit's like ...nothing. In fact, it may sometimes feel like there's a disconnect or distancing between yourself and God.

Now, there could be a whole lot of stuff going on for you that obscures or gets in the way of you hearing God –if you suspect that's the case, that's when you come to talk to me. If you're just not sure where you are in this life of relationship and connection to Christ, or where God *is* in your current circumstances, then come with me into what the Scriptures offer us today. As I dug into these texts this week, I needed to hear them as well for my own life. Quietly emerging from these passages it was the lives of God's little people – the ordinary people - that stood out. It's the "little ones", the ordinary folk with no great power or influence, who end up as God's instruments.

Naaman was a highly placed public figure in the country of Aram – Southern Syria - known for its worship of heathen gods. With Naaman at the head of its army, Aram had conquered Israel. Naaman is powerful; and influential - the star general of the king, a celebrity, a mover and shaker.

But he has a problem – a skin disease- possibly leprosy. Given that he still holds a prominent position, it is likely that Naaman's skin disease is not serious or not yet serious; he's not been relegated to the margins of society as was the usual case with lepers, but it's bad enough for him to go to great trouble to seek a cure.

One day, his wife tells him about something their little Hebrew slave girl said. This young girl was captured in a raid on northern Israel, and brought back as a slave. She'd said that there was a great prophet over there, in Samaria, named Elisha, who might be able to help Naaman be cured. So- as big powerful generals would do, Naaman works the known systems of power. He goes straight to his king. And the king of Aram also works the corridors of power, and sends Naaman off with a letter to the king of Israel.

So Naaman sets off in a manner befitting the great and powerful, with a vast entourage and massive riches to impress, and to offer for his healing. As such people know, everything can be bought.

Let's press "pause" for a moment, and take stock of the story so far. On one side of the ledger, a man of the highest political influences and power, with a great need for healing. On the other side, a prophet in an alien and defeated country who may heal him. The connection between the two – a young Hebrew slave girl – no name, no power, nothing but the knowledge from her faith of a God who works through prophets, and who isn't afraid of passing on the information.

The story continues: Naaman goes straight to the King of Israel. It's like today's bureaucracies – Heads of government talk to other heads, departmental heads to other such heads and so on down the line. You don't expect your Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces when in enemy territory to go directly to the kitchen-hand for a cuppa; he gives the message to be sent down the line so the desired cuppa is served up in a proper way according to his status. Israel's king, of course, can't cure leprosy, and is afraid this is some sort of plot that will give the King of Aram an excuse to attack. The message then comes from Elisha – tell Naaman to come to me.

So Naaman goes; expecting a flashy display of healing. But Elisha ignores Naaman's both expectations and his credentials, and doesn't bother to come out and meet him. He sends his servant with instructions for Naaman to bathe in the River Jordan seven times – something that Naaman considers way below his dignity. He's very angry that he didn't get the VIP treatment.

"See who I am – important, rich, politically powerful. Pay attention to me" he seems to say. It seems altogether too much for Naaman. His rivers at home are much nicer, so he goes away in a rage.

Fortunately for Naaman, his servants are more attentive and persuade him forget his ego and to do as the prophet instructs. And so, Naaman is cured. "The manner of the healing turns Naaman's expectations inside out and upside down; the prophet Elisha is not even present, and there are no prayers, incantations, no laying on of hands, nothing one would have associated with healing at that time. But there is a powerful subtext to this story: the God of Israel has very strong powers indeed and can act directly and immediately without power brokers or mediators. Equally clear in this story, as in several instances with Elijah before this and with Jesus after this, is that God brings healing to foreigners as well as to the people of Israel. And Naaman goes on to believe in that God of Israel^{vi}.

But the piercing core of the story is that what counts in God's healing work is the intervention of the nameless servants –the little slave girl, Naaman's servants who with him in Samaria, and Elisha's servants willing to face this powerful man with the message from Elisha.

If the newspapers picked up a story like this, we'd get headlines like "Military Chief cured by Religious Shaman." Those little people – the slave girl and the servants – who actually make things happen –wouldn't get a mention. Yet it's these ordinary folk who have made the difference. Without them, there'd be no healing. Without them, Naaman would not have found the one true God. "God works through the unexpected, the little ones, the unnamed, even the muddy river, while the mighty are not only humbled, but healed." (Kate Huey).

Another pause, to take stock. It's the "little ones", the ordinary, relatively powerless people, who end up as God's instruments. Maybe that's God's message for you. Be who you are; using your God-given commonsense and knowledge to help people. That little slave girl wouldn't have had any religious education, just a memory, an imprint that as an Israelite, she was part of a nation who believed in the one God who could work miracles.

And for a little reinforcement of this – we jump to the Gospel reading. Jesus sends out seventy disciples to cure the sick and give the message that "the kingdom of God has come near". Did you notice the requirements, the theological education and the skill-set asked of these disciples? "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." Matthew and Mark's gospels add "carry no money." Jesus' followers were drawn from the poorer edges of society –they certainly weren't educated; they didn't have political or social influence. Like the slave girl and the servants in Naaman's story, they were unnamed; and all they had, really, was themselves, and a living relationship with the one true God. Nothing else. And the kingdom is brought near as Almighty God works through ordinary folk. Note how the Gospel for today ends –with Jesus' prayer of thanks that God has hidden these things from the wise and intelligent –the Kings and commanders - and revealed them to the little ones.

I'm willing to say that today's texts are being enacted before our very eyes, right in our congregation here. We most certainly have with us "the amazing, even shocking capacity of our generous God to hand over his work –his holy work - to ordinary human characters – to us little ones - while he remains in the background. We mightn't think we have any great gifts to offer, but we can all be instruments of connection to God by being our ordinary Christ-filled, or Spirit-filled, selves."ⁱⁱⁱ

Like the nameless servants who become God's instruments in the story of Naaman, and like the ordinary followers sent out by Jesus, our job is to be the connectors of God's extraordinary, abundant, and life-giving power to

those who need it. For love, peace, and justice, and for the repair of the world's fabric, may we too, realise that we can be God's instruments of grace and healing in all of our ordinary life circumstances. And we, too, can receive God's healing touch through other ordinary, little people of God. Just take a look around you here, give and receive from others like you.

ⁱ Rev Angela Askew. Sermons that Work

ⁱⁱ *ibid*