

Sermon Archive 265

Sunday 13 October, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 2 Kings 5: 1-15c

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Within the bubble of power and privilege we find three people and a problem - well several problems actually.

The first person is Naaman. Naaman's a military man, the commander of a really big army. Not an army of fat-bellied bureaucrats, softened through years of peace-time paper pushing. No, this is a fighting force, resistance-trained through real and regular engagement. This army is fit, and really good at victory. Who would be a perfect figure head for such an outfit? Well, a person who, himself, is fit and good at victory! Someone who regularly gets what he wants. Someone who insists. And that's Naaman. When Naaman arrives, he arrives with horses and chariots. He doesn't come quietly, and expects respect, with a touch of fear. Naaman is powerful and important, and knows it.

Also in the bubble of power and privilege we have the king of Aram - a rather nice nation of flowing rivers and lovely landscape. He's got access to all the movers and shakers. He doesn't really do "little people"; preferring just to go straight to the top. It's as if, if he learned that there was a useful commodity, privately owned in a neighbouring country, he wouldn't talk to the private owner. He'd talk to the king of the private owner. Why bother with the common folk, when you're well connected with the top? Write a letter, make a phone call. Just explain what is wanted, and the high-level network will provide. The little people, to the extent that they're relevant at all, will just fall into line. That's how it works in the bubble.

The third person in the bubble is also a king. He's the king of Israel (a neighbouring country of various commodities). I'm not sure, actually, that he's all that well. Perhaps the pressure of office is taking a toll. The other day he received a letter, and his reaction was almost paranoid. With an ordinary letter of introduction his hands, he rips his clothes and rants about

someone trying to pick a fight with him. This isn't normal. Inside the bubble of power and privilege, there's an itchy trigger finger. We'd better hope, for the sake of everyone, that it's not too close to the red button. Very privileged. Very powerful. Not very well.

To stress-test the dynamics of the bubble, comes leprosy. Leprosy is a disease. It is a disgrace. It is often taken as a sign that God is cursing. One of the powerful elite, one of the key figures in the bubble has leprosy - and there's absolutely nothing the elite can do. They can parade the chariots; they can write their letters; they can make their paranoid flourish - but none of it makes a difference. Leprosy isn't listening, and the powerful people have no way forward.

Living real life, outside the bubble, we have a young woman with no name. We're told she's been captured during some kind of military skirmish - so she's something like a prisoner of war. She's young. She's been forced into service of a well-connected woman. So I guess we could call her a slave. There's no power here at all. Or is there? She has an idea - is an idea powerful? Some ideas might be. Her idea is around this thing called "faith" - a kind of naïve confidence - a silly belief in finding a different way forward. (God save us from fools and dreamers! God save us **by** fools and dreamers.) Foolishness to Greeks, scandalous to commanders and paranoid leaders, her idea is floated. How about seeking the assistance of the "man of God". An expression of faith and hope, a wee suggestion made by one of the unimportant little people. That is how the first step around the intractable problem is taken. And it's how the healing is begun.

The next step along the way of healing lies with the "man of God" himself. He's never received a letter from the King of Aram. As we know, the King of Aram only writes letters to important people. The fact that the commodity sought is in Elisha's hands, not in the hands of the King of Israel, is irrelevant to the King of Aram. He's not writing a letter to Elisha, asking a favour of Elisha, revealing his need to Elisha. That's not how things operate in the bubble. Outside the bubble, Elisha's first step is to tell the hysterical King of Israel to settle down, and stop tearing his clothes. Truth to power, Elisha to the king: "stop being angry and stupid - it's not helping the situation". Elisha then makes himself available to help - he issues an invitation for Naaman to come around and visit.

When Naaman takes him up on the invitation, Naaman visits as only Naaman can. He arrives with his horses and chariots - with all his expectations that he will be taken seriously - a touch of grovelling and fear thrown on the part of the prophet. But the prophet doesn't work like that. To the ridiculous, overblown arrival, to the invitation to be impressed by all the show and power, Elisha refuses to respond. He doesn't come out to greet the flourish. He stays inside, and sends a message via a servant. Did the military man seriously expect the God-man to give a fig about chariots and horses? Have chariots and horses helped with the leprosy? No, the "man of God" isn't interested - but he does have a suggestion about how to deal with the leprosy. In refusing to be impressed by unimpressive things, in prescribing a dose of humility, the journey to the healing continues.

Back inside the bubble, though, Naaman flies into a rage. He responds as badly as the garment-tearing King of Israel. Is this perhaps what powerful people do when power doesn't work? Naaman is furious that he hasn't been worshipped. He's furious that he's been dealt with by a servant. He's furious that the cure is all about a stupid trickle of a river. He's furious that there was no fanfare and magic. Inside this bubble, there is rage.

Living an ordinary life just outside that bubble, but close to it, we find some other people lacking names. Like the slave girl, they're simple servants. But they have a surprising courage. When the commander is angry, the easiest, most self-preserving thing, you'd think, would be to keep away. Run for cover. But these servants approach him with courageous simple encouragement. "Go on, Naaman; give it a go", they say. "What's the harm in trying?" They don't say "get over yourself", though they may well be thinking it. They simply encourage him to do the humble thing - go wash in the humble river. It is as little people find courage, and give encouragement to others, it is as the arrogant are nurtured in humility by unnamed no ones, that the healing continues.

Second to last bit! Finally moving out of his bubble, Naaman goes down to the river. As he says, it's not much of a river - nowhere as impressive as any in his own land. It is simply a river in which, many years later, some

guy called John will baptise someone called Jesus. It's a local stream in which Jesus says "let's fulfil all righteousness", and over which God says "this is my beloved son" - a place where love speaks and identity is found. It's an awa. I don't know: is it pushing it a bit to cast a river, a simple piece of geography, as a character in the story of healing? A river, a hill, a sunset, a beach, the feel of grass under bare feet, the sun shine warm upon your face, the road rising to meet you, you being held in the hand of the Lord of creation . . . as we wonder about healing . . . Naaman "goes down" ("goes down, - the high and powerful one **goes down**") to the river, and the healing's begun.

Pretty much the last bit now. We are told, in the story, that Naaman comes out of that river with skin that is like that of "a young boy". And the Hebrew word for "young boy" is the same word used to say "servant". Having gone down to the river, having washed in a way that is humbling, he takes on the flesh of a servant - and is healed. The healed one appears in the skin of a servant. He joins all the other servants who were willing to give it a try - and the healing's begun.

People of Knox, what is this to us? If we were to be part of the people of the healing God, then we would need to join the servants. We would need to float the ideas that faith has given us. We would need to risk seeming naïve in being hopeful (the fools and dreamers). We would need to tell the powerful to calm down and stop being stupid. We would need to reframe the significance of horses and chariots - worshipping God, rather than hardware. We would need to unmask the unreality of the bubble, by living freely and with courage. We would need to go down to the river (go down, go down), take off our shoes and be a humble part of creation.

What *is* that to us? Could it be our healing as well?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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