

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

2 Kings 5:1-14 ("The Healing of Naaman")

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour 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. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Will you come and follow me (CH533) *Seek ye first the kingdom of God* (CH641)
I come with joy, a child of God (CH656) *Fight the good fight* (CH517)

Who do we think is the most important character in the story we find in the second book of Kings, chapter 5? It starts and ends with Naaman, the successful military leader with an unfortunate medical condition, so maybe he is the obvious choice? He is certainly quite self-important, taking offence that Elisha sent a messenger, instead of coming to him in person!

Or maybe it is Elisha, the prophet, who is instrumental in Naaman's healing and could clearly channel the power of God for good in this world?

We have two kings we can throw into the mix – the king of Aram and the King of Israel - and kings are usually regarded as very important people.

However, I want to reflect this morning on the impact of the least significant person, in terms of social standing, in the whole story. Yes, the slave girl with no name, or at least none that we are told about. If we look at this story through her eyes, we can learn a lot about how God works in our world and the kind of part we can play in that work.

We know very little for certain about this girl but, with some imagination, we can fill out her backstory. On an ordinary day like any other, an enemy raiding party swoops down from the East into Israel, bringing mayhem and destruction and taking whatever they want. Maybe her parents were killed in the raid, maybe not. Either way, she is wrenched from family and friends and she ends up enslaved and working for the wife of the man who was in charge of the destruction of her community.

Where is God in all of this, she might have thought – “I am in the wrong job, in the wrong place and with the wrong people. And I have no future!” She could easily have concluded that her God, the God of Israel, was not as powerful as the gods of Aram, and lost her faith. However, one thing is very clear. Her faith in God remains strong. She is confident that God has power, certainly the power to heal.

However, it would have been entirely understandable if this young girl had seen the power of God as something to be used against her captors. She could have responded to Naaman's leprosy with some satisfaction. She could have seen it as punishment from God for his cruelty. She could wish him a long, slow painful death. That would serve him right for oppressing her people and causing them misery.

But her response was utterly different. She is not looking to punish her enemy, but to bless him. She doesn't want Naaman dead, she wants him healed. Somehow, she has the grace to love her enemy, long before Jesus startled his followers with the injunction to do just that, when he challenged them with these words: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

We see also that this girl has an inclusive understanding of God's love. She was clinging firmly to her belief in the God of Israel while many in her country were already flirting with the worship of other gods – the idolatry that would lead to the whole nation of Israel being taken into exile.

But here she is, convinced that the God of Israel can and will heal a Gentile, that his grace extends beyond the chosen nation, as indeed God promised Abraham, back near the start of the Bible narrative, when he says: “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”

Indeed, when the Israelites were taken into exile, from Jerusalem to Babylon, they were commanded by God – in the words of the prophet Jeremiah – to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it.”

This girl seems to understand the reach of God’s love and be prepared to channel that love to those who need it, whoever they are, wherever they come from.

But let’s look at what she did, specifically, how little she did. She simply uttered two sentences:

‘If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.’

That’s all she said. However, these two sentences came from faith in God and love for others and God used them. Look at the consequences: Naaman is healed of his leprosy; Naaman comes to believe in the God of Israel; Naaman’s household, his army and his king, learn that the God of Israel can do what the pagan gods cannot. All of this unfolded because a girl spoke two sentences, unleashing a chain of events.

What a reminder for us that something very small and seemingly insignificant that we do can achieve a lot in the hands of God. How big is a mustard seed, a widow’s coin, a cup of water. Being effective, making a difference, does not depend on us being important or powerful. This girl was the least powerful person we can imagine – a slave, a child without rights, an enemy in a foreign land, a girl in a patriarchal society. She was a nobody, we don’t even know her name.

About 850 years after these events, the apostle Paul reflected on the status of the people who were in the forefront of the Jesus movement:

“Consider, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

This girl with no name could well have thought that she was in the wrong job, in the wrong country, with the wrong people and settled for sullen and surly obedience to her mistress, just longing to be elsewhere. As we have seen, she didn’t do that and her faith and love brought good things for others.

Do we sometimes wish we could be somewhere else, doing something else, with other people than the ones we’re stuck with? Do we long to be doing something more significant or more important?

What if, for now at least, we are exactly where God wants us to be? What if the people we are with day by day in our families, on our street, in our community, in our workplace, are exactly the people God wants us to love and serve. What would happen if we prayed for them, looked out for ways to serve them, were attentive to the needs of these others in our lives and were less preoccupied with ourselves and our concerns? Who knows how God might work through our small acts of obedience?

Do we really need to be in a high position or be highly educated or have a lot of money to be a channel of love and grace in the place where God has put us? Clearly not.

The example of the girl with no name assures us that all we need is to act in faith and love, and God does the rest. Amen.

Praying for others

God of the journey,
on this first Sunday of Lent we come before you
recalling the travels of our Lord as he turned towards Jerusalem and the Cross.
in his walking, he must have agonised over what would lie ahead:
his arrival in the big city; the conflicts and pains; the trials and the torments.

In a similar way in our own time, many people know
the struggles of being on the road:
thirsty people who must trek for mile after mile
just to find a supply of water which is safe to drink;
lonely people whose work must take them from place to place;
homeless people with nowhere to call their own;
displaced people for whom a life with family is a thing of the past;
orphaned people whose lives have been torn apart
by turmoil beyond our imagining.

We who have water to drink,
we who have stable home lives and loved ones to care;
we who have roofs over our heads and beds in which to sleep at night;
we whose families and friends are there for us when we call ...
grant to us the wisdom and the generosity, we pray,
to seek out all who are lost, and to share with them the love of Christ -
the Christ who travelled long miles for us ...
and for all.

In his Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Lent Daily Thoughts: Our Presbytery is inviting everyone to sign up for a very short daily biblical reflection for each day of Lent, now underway. To have a thought arrive on your computer's desktop day by day, contact Caroline Kirk at the Presbytery office: ckirk@churchofscotland.org.uk .

Lent Study Group: Our Lent group is using a book by Hilary Brand called *The Power of Small Choices*. It is based around not one but two films: *Babette's Feast* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. The discussion group is running for six weeks at 3pm on Tuesday afternoons from until Tuesday 8th April inclusive. (And it's not too late to join!) To find out more, see Abigail, Frances or Robin.

Jars of Grace 2025: Our Jars of Grace 2025 appeal is in aid of a village in rural Rwanda which would benefit hugely from having its own 40,0000 litre concrete tank for holding a community water supply. Get collecting coins from now until Easter, and together we can make this dream a reality.

Stated Annual Meetings: These will be held on Sunday 16th February (at Gladsmuir Church) and Sunday 23rd February (at Longniddry Church).