

No Name

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Rev. Bob Griggs

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Today's scripture is a great story. It has it all: exotic location, suspense, dramatic action, and intriguing characters, who are caught in potentially deadly conflict. The scripture is also highly visual, as in the scene where Naaman and his army pull up in front of the home of the prophet Elisha, the sun flashing on their spears and armor, while their horses pant for breath. Then a shaft of sunlight strikes the prophet's door. What a scene!

It would be so easy to make a story with such great scenes into a movie. There's even a sequel right at hand, as the story goes on past what was read this morning to include the ultimate conversion of Naaman to a worshipper of the God of Israel. And if one does make the story into a movie, then of course the characters have to be well cast. The role of the powerful, foreign general Naaman obviously falls to Arnold Schwarzenegger, but what about the role of Elisha the prophet? Well, I don't want to say too much, but I'll be unemployed this time tomorrow; and modesty aside, I'd be a perfect fit. Don't laugh. If you read the story closely, you'll see that Elisha never actually appears in the story and that he does all his communicating through a messenger. I can do that.

Be all of this as it may, it is a great story that would make a great movie, whoever gets to play Elisha. But, more relevant for us this morning, why is this story in the Bible? What is the author trying to tell us?

Commentators tell us that this story was popular in Israel during the time of their exile in Babylon. It tells them that though they are in exile, their God still reigns. As the hymn puts it, God is the ruler yet. In the story God acts to heal the powerful foreigner Naaman of leprosy. This is good news for the exiles. If God can act for Naaman, then God can act for them, bringing them home from exile. Their future can be better than their past. If God reigns, there is reason to hope. No wonder this story was popular for them.

I think that this is one reason the story is in the Bible, but it does not exhaust the meaning it has for us. The story teaches us about God; it also teaches us about ourselves. We can see this as we consider the cast of characters. Of course there's Naaman, and I'll come back to him. Then there's Elisha, whose actions are problematic in the story. Why does he stay inside and not come out to greet and speak to Naaman? Is he just being obstinate and rude? Is he trying to humble the arrogant Naaman? Maybe it's just the way Elisha is. Read other stories about him, and you'll be tempted to conclude that he's simply a grumpy prophet.

So Elisha's failure to come out could simply be a matter of his personality. But instead of being personal, it might also be strategic. If Elisha heals Naaman, he gets the credit. Naaman would be beholden to him. As it is, by his not appearing, Naaman attributes his healing to the God of Israel. The power of God, not the power of Elisha, cures him. As a result Naaman comes to worship this God.

Of course Naaman and Elisha are not the only actors who need to be cast. There are others; call them the no names. There's the servant girl, a daughter of Israel, who'd been captured by Naaman and his army in a raid on Israel. Because of this, instead of being home with her family where she should be, she's in a strange land, living as a servant to Naaman's wife. Why should she of all people care about Naaman's leprosy? He's the source of all her suffering. One would think she'd be the last person in the world to have compassion for him.

But she does. She takes his suffering into her own heart. She knows how he can find help, and she speaks to her mistress about the power of healing possessed by the prophet Elisha in Israel. So doing, she takes a grave risk. What if something goes wrong? What if Elisha fails to cure him? Then she'll be the one left alone to face Naaman's wrath. Yet she takes the risk to act on her compassion. She does what she can do in order to help. In the situations of our own lives, this is what our faith calls us to do. She is our teacher.

There's another no name in the story who is also our teacher. This is Naaman's servant. When Naaman is raging that Elisha did not come out to see him, but instead sends a messenger who tells him to go bathe seven times in the River Jordan, he explodes in rage. He turns around and begins to lead his army back home.

At this key moment in the story, when it seems that it's all going to fall apart, his servant like the servant girl in Israel takes a risk based on compassion. The servant humbly encourages Naaman to do as the prophet told him. Who knows? He's come so far and maybe it will work. It's worth a try. In his fury Naaman might have speared the servant on the spot. Instead, his desire for healing is so great that it overcomes his anger. He does as the servant suggests, and is healed. By having the courage of his compassion, by acting to help in spite of the risk, this no name servant is also our teacher. Our faith calls us to do as he did.

Now it's time to consider Naaman. What does he have to teach us? In his arrogance, stubbornness, and pride, he can teach us as a negative example. Maybe that's it. But I don't think this is fair to him. After all both the captive daughter of Israel and his own servant cared enough about him to risk their lives in order to help him. There must have been something else about him that drew them to him. They say that if you show people your successes and your strength, they may be impressed, but they'll keep their distance. But if you show people your suffering, where you're hurting, they'll be drawn close. I believe that this is why they were drawn towards Naaman.

There's something more. It's about sin. My favorite definition of sin comes from Gregory of Nazianzus who defined sin as "failure to grow". By the way, you know that I've been in this line

of work a long time when I have my very own favorite definition of sin. In the story Naaman avoids this sin of failing to grow. He grows, and he changes. He puts aside his arrogance, he bathes in the Jordan, and he is healed. In his gratitude for this healing, this powerful foreigner becomes a convert to the God of Israel. In his willingness to change and grow, Naaman is also our teacher, one our faith calls us to emulate.

Let's consider the no names of the story one more time. Often we feel like them, asking the questions: Who am I? What can I do? What difference can I make? We feel as if we have no power or agency. Whatever the story is, we have little part to play in it. The no names show that this is not true. Their courage and compassion gave them power to act. And the God who reigns took what they did and turned it into a great good. As for them, so it can be for us. Our power is great; we can make a huge difference; God can work through us, just as God worked through them. The story of the healing of Naaman was a source of hope for the Jewish exiles long ago. It can also be a source of hope for us today.

In closing, I hope that I've been able to show that this is a story that has much to teach us. There are a number of reasons why it's in the Bible. Whether they make it into a movie or not, whether or not they cast the movie wisely, it's still a great story.