Unexpected Sources of Wisdom

2 Kings 5: 1-14

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This Bible story is a rip-roaring tale. If it were a movie trailer, we'd all be ready to buy our ticket. There's the great victorious warrior plagued by a skin disease. There are two proud kings who talk past each other and have a penchant for melodrama. There are multiple nameless servants, the keepers of wisdom. There's a prophet, sequestered behind closed doors, relaying seemingly nonsensical instructions through messengers. And of course there's the miracle, the impossible to explain healing that gives us the happy ending we all crave.

I'm seeing Chris Hemsworth as Naaman. Zendaya for the servant girl role. Robert Downey Jr. as the King of Israel who theatrically rips his clothes. And terribly miscast as the prophet Elisha—Tom Hardy. Because, Big Shot Movie Producer, if you really want me to buy a ticket you better find a role for Tom Hardy.

But this story isn't about movie stars. It's not about kings or servants, or even Namaan. This is a story about God. Like every bit of scripture we've ever read or ever will read, these words are revelation about our Creator. An assurance that God is present and paying attention and working among and through us. All of us.

Don't tell Morgan Freeman, but the truth is, God is not a role we cast. In THIS story from 2nd Kings, God does not wave a hand or send lightning from the sky or even arrive in a manger surrounded by angels joyously singing. God flies under the radar here. And though God's role is only inferred, we get a glimpse of God's presence among us. And sometimes a glimpse is enough to keep us going.

So back to Chris Hemsworth, ahem Namaan. Scripture describes him as a "great man" as evidenced by his victories in battle, the riches of his household, and his position of favor in the eyes of the king. Perhaps all this so-called greatness is because Namaan is favored by God. Does God favor the "great ones" in this life?

As the story unfolds, we quickly realize Namaan has been reading his own press. He believes the hype. He believes that he, Namaan the great man, deserves great things. And one of his "things" is a girl he has taken from Israel.

While the servant girl knows she had been stolen from her people and enslaved, Namaan likely regards her simply as the spoils of war. Women and children had no value in and of themselves in those times, so after a battle they were scooped up by the victors along with other material goods, like weapons and livestock. In many places of the world today, women and children are still treated as material goods, proof that the Kingdom of God is yet to come.

This displaced girl, a servant to Namaan's wife, is the opposite of "great" in the land. She remains unnamed in the story. And yet she has a voice and she chooses to use it. Perhaps she speaks to let her captor know she still believes in the greatness of HER defeated people in HER defeated land. Perhaps she is tender-hearted and despite being held captive she wants healing for anyone's affliction. Maybe she's looking for favor from her mistress, a reward for valuable information. We don't know why she speaks, but we do know she could have just as easily remained silent. In fact, silence would have been less risky: what if her words do not lead to the healing of Namaan? She is risking her life by recommending Elisha as a healer from God.

Speaking up when you know a truth, when you know something about God that should be shared, is risky. You might risk your personal safety, like this servant girl. Or equally as daunting is the possible risk of relationship, of reputation, or wealth or power. Yet the Bible tells us, again and again, the risk of sharing God is always, always worth it. While it may cost us something this very minute, things will be better in the end.

But first, to know God, to hear from the Creator, we need to pay attention. Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden. What happened to that acute awareness of God? Those first humans had one on one conversations with their Creator, a real live, old-fashioned, in person chat. Did our ability to hear God erode over years of evolution?

Each step humanity takes to value the things of this world over the things of God's world thickens the wall between us and God's Kingdom. Sometimes when we pray we get a clear signal, but most of the time we're rushing and stumbling through life, missing every message meant for us.

Namaan was blessed with many things of this world but also cursed with a skin disease. Despite all the wealth he could ever want, this ailment was something over which he had no control. The first hint of a possible cure came to him through a whisper, from a person with no name or status, who had the courage to speak.

How did the servant girl know about Elisha, the prophet, the man capable of healing through the power of God? Could it be that God makes God's self known to the least of these? To the people whose names we don't know, whose faces blur in our memories. Is it possible God is revealed not just to "the great" but most clearly to the "least of these?"

Most modern stories would have us believe God is whispering into the ears of the powerful. But this story *begins* with wisdom from a servant girl. Yes, the *middle verses* are filled with powerful men who rip their garments and stomp their feet and feel disrespected despite their silver and gold. And the story *ends* with nameless servants again, those convincing Namaan, our hero with the big ego, to just bathe in the Jordan seven times and see what happens.

Humanity is described in scripture as God's people, or more commonly phrased, "the people of God." God is speaking to all of God's people. Who among us is listening?

If we remove our Bose headphones, stop the constant shopping for the right clothes to wear to the right parties where we can see and be seen, if our ears

are no longer filled with the clang of silver and gold coins as we count our money, we will discover time for quiet, for listening, for observation, for prayer. God is always speaking. We need to listen.

It seems obvious that the miracle in this story is the healing of Namaan whose flesh is restored to that of a young boy. But I suspect the true miracle may be Namaan actually listening to the words of the servant girl at home and the advice of his servants by the waters of the Jordan. Perhaps the presence of the skin disease itself imbued Namaan with enough humility to listen to God revelations from unexpected sources, his servants, who indeed are also God's people. Who in God's eyes are also "great."

I attended a memorial service this week. My friend wasn't "great" in Namaan's terms, she only fought quiet, personal battles. And she wasn't nameless like the servant girl, she had means and her own agency. Sherron was somewhere in between. You know, like us.

Upon diagnosis three years ago, Sherron's body was already riddled with stupid, stupid pancreatic cancer and she tried just about everything to keep it at bay. I know her family prayed for a miraculous healing, for God to take away the affliction and make her *whole*.

During her illness, she crossed paths with a doctor who listened carefully to this quiet woman's passion about increasing early detection opportunities for all patients. From that conversation was born a new pancreatic cancer screening clinic at Piedmont. The clinic has already saved a few lives through early diagnosis.

My friend heard God's voice in the quiet and spoke up to a doctor. She quieted the clanging noise of her silver and gold by giving it away and inspiring others to do likewise. And she did something to change the lives of people she would never meet.

In the end, my friend did get a miracle. It may not have been in the shape of what her family prayed for, but my goodness, using your waning energy to save the lives of people for years beyond your own death? That's miraculous.

And I believe Sherron's family ultimately got their miracle as well, because in death Sherron is indeed now made whole, her baptism is complete, and she is in the arms of her Lord.

Let's listen for the whispers, Saint Luke's. Let's quiet our minds and our mouths. Let's loosen our grip on the things of this world that build that barrier between us and God. Let's invite God to make some miracles happen through us ordinary people, by saying "yes" to the risk of sharing God with others through our words and our treasure.

Because, though it may cost us, the eventual outcome is always, always worth it. Amen.