

One Who Is More than a Prophet

II Kings 5:1-19

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This morning we are introduced to a very important man. His name is Naaman. We are introduced to him in a way that highlights how important he is. He was the commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man. He was highly regarded. Through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. This man must have been accustomed to power and influence and authority and privilege. But along with introducing us to him by his claims to greatness, we are also told he was facing something for which his titles and honors and power and authority were no match. He had leprosy. And he didn't know how to get better from this dreaded skin disease.

Although leprosy might well have felt like a dead end for Naaman, the narrative moves forward when a girl comes forward who says, "I know a guy." When your car is broken, it is good news when someone says, "I know a guy." When your air conditioner has gone kaput, it's manna from heaven when someone says, "I know a guy." When you can't cut the red tape with the local, the regional, the state, or the national government, it is music to your ears when someone says, "I know a guy." When your body is hurting and aching and sore and miserable and you don't know where to turn for comfort, for relief, for healing, nothing sounds sweeter than when someone says, "I know a guy."

Naaman, this powerful and valiant commander of the armies of the king of Aram is stuck with his sickness. He is laid low by his leprosy. But this story is going to move forward because someone appears on the scene who says, "I know a guy." The person who comes forward to say, "I know a guy" stands in marked contrast to Naaman. She is a young girl. She has been taken captive from her home. She is now a servant, perhaps in those times even a slave. This girl has no power. No

authority. No position. Not a one of those things. But what she does have is that she knows a guy. And because this young slave girl is an Israelite, she knows the God who has the power to intervene on behalf of this powerful and influential man who has run up against a disease over which he has no power. This young slave girl might not seem to have much going for her, but she knows a guy, and she knows her God. So Naaman heeds her advice and travels to Israel in search of healing.

When the slave girl says she knows a guy, she was referring to Elisha, the prophet in Israel. And yet when Naaman goes to Israel, Naaman goes with a letter to the king of Israel. The problem is, the king isn't the guy the slave girl knows. And the king knows he isn't the guy. In fact, when he hears Naaman has come to Israel for healing, the king tears his robes and says, "Am I God...why does he come to me to be cured of his leprosy?" This story is full of irony. The powerful commander of an army and the reigning monarchs of Israel and Aram are helpless in this story. Healing will not come through the halls of power. While the king is tearing his robes, the prophet comes forward. "Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." Elisha the prophet does not run from this situation. He certainly does not throw up his hands in despair. The slave girl knows a guy, and the guy's name is Elisha the prophet. And the prophet knows his God.

Although Naaman is initially upset that Elisha won't come meet him face to face, and although Naaman balks at the command to go and wash in the Jordan, he eventually does exactly what Elisha the prophet commands him to do. After washing seven times in the Jordan River, "his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a boy." What a difference it makes when you know a guy and the guy you know knows God. So today we have a powerful testimony to the ability of God to heal and make whole. For some reason the ones who select the lectionary readings thought this would be a good place to end this story. Naaman has come to Israel, met Elisha, obeyed his commands, and found healing and restoration. His leprosy is gone and his skin has been restored and is clean like that of a young boy. End of story.

But to end the story with the healing seems to miss what is undoubtedly the heart of this narrative. Naaman, freshly healed and restored returns to the man of God. As a result of his healing he says, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” Naaman then tries to give the prophet Elisha a gift. When that offer is refused, Naaman makes an interesting request. He asks if he can take some dirt back with him. He wants to take some earth back to his home. In this request he betrays what one commentator calls an unsophisticated theology. Naaman thinks God can only be worshiped on Israelite soil. Since Naaman is returning to Aram, he wants to take some of that soil so when he bows down he will be bowing down to the God of Israel.¹ The theology may well be unsophisticated. But there is a beauty in the simplicity. As a result of his healing he has come to believe that the God of Israel is the one true God, and when Naaman returns to his home in Aram he will return with a faith in this one specific God. When Naaman bows down in worship and reverence he will be bowing to the God of Israel, who is the God of the whole world.

Naaman came for the gift of healing. When it was all said and done, he not only had the gift, he had the giver. He came to faith in God. Wouldn't it be a shame to cut the story short, and only focus on the gift he received? The beauty and the power of this story is that Naaman receives not just the gift of healing, he receives the giver. He receives God. He comes to faith in God, and he vows to worship God alone.

This story grows in significance when we realize there was another guy who came along, and the things prophets like Elisha and Elijah did, he did those same types of things. Elisha and Elijah struck their cloaks against the river and the waters parted. This guy spoke to angry seas and made them calm. This guy even walked on the waters. Elisha and Elijah both had miracles related to feeding. This guy took some loaves of bread and a few fish and he fed 5,000 and then 4,000 people...with leftovers. Elisha and Elijah had episodes where they raised the dead to life. This guy raised a widow's son and the daughter of Jairus and his good friend Lazarus. This guy healed lepers and made the lame walk. He gave sight to the blind and opened the ears of the deaf. This guy did what Elisha and Elijah did, and he did more. This guy claimed he was Living Water.

¹ Choon-Leong Seow, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume III, p. 195.

This guy claimed he was the Bread of Life. This guy claimed he had the power to forgive sins, that he and the Father in Heaven were one, that he was the Messiah of God, the Anointed One. This guy was no ordinary guy. God affirmed who this guy was when he spoke from heaven and from the Mountain of Transfiguration and said, “This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.” Not only did this guy raise others from the dead, when he died and was buried in the grave, he was raised from the dead.

This guy’s name was Jesus. People flocked to him to be healed. And they were. People flocked to him for healing, for miracles, for food, for his touch, and for his blessing. We know this guy. We know this guy named Jesus. He was so out of the ordinary, so unique, that when we talk about Jesus we don’t say, “We know a guy and this guy knows God.” When we talk about Jesus, when we affirm our faith in Jesus, we don’t say, “We know a guy and this guy knows God.” We say, “We know a guy and he is God.” That is what we have been saying the past few Sunday mornings we read together The Apostles’ Creed. “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Begotten Son.” This morning we again confessed our faith with a wonderful affirmation of who Jesus was and is and will always be.

I want to state clearly that I believe the miracles of healing Jesus performed. I not only believe in those miracles, I also believe they were signs of who he was, God in human flesh. I believe the miracles of healing point to God’s intended will for all creation. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus God has shown us a vision of what will one day take place. One day every sickness, every illness, every broken thing, every shattered dream, every fear and disappointment, every disaster and every act of destruction will vanish away in the new creation of Jesus Christ, the one who makes all things new. I believe that just as Jesus healed and made whole there will be a day when there is no longer any sadness, suffering, crying, or pain. And because all of this will be true one day, there will be days right here and right now when God’s power in Jesus is revealed in amazing and miraculous ways. And every time we see these miracles and blessings, we bow down in worship and reverence and say, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Today, and every day, is an invitation to come to Jesus. We know a guy who heals and makes whole and comforts and strengthens and reconciles and blesses and loves, and loves, and loves, and loves. As we come to Jesus, let us come not just because he has power to heal and make whole, let us come because he is God's Beloved Son, God's One and Only Beloved Son, and in him and him alone is salvation and eternal life.

Sister Mary was a nun who served as a first grade teacher. She loved teaching, but she had painful ankles that made it almost impossible to do the work of a teacher. Just the thought that she couldn't be with her "Little people" broke her heart. Friends invited her to a time of prayer. Basically they said, "We know a guy." Sister Mary was shy and hesitant about receiving this type of prayer, but she finally agreed.

Her friends gathered around her, laid hands on her ankles, and prayed for her ankles. But her ankles were not healed. Instead, her ear that had been nearly deaf since childhood suddenly opened, allowing her to hear with that ear for the time in many years. There was laughter and joy. She came the next week for prayer. Nothing happened with her ankles. Instead, the arthritis in her arms improved. Week after week the group prayed, and the ankles didn't get any better. And yet week after other things happened, minor aches and pains would improve or vanish entirely. Now here is the part I love. It says, "During this time, God was working marvelously with Mary in other ways. She became deeply aware that God loved her. Of course Mary already 'knew' this, and she had taught her first graders that God is love. But now for the first time in her life Mary felt God's passionate, tender love. God was no longer a demanding father ready with punishments...but one who delighted in her. As Jesus became more real to her as friend as well as savior, Mary overcame a fear of speaking before adults...But Mary's ankles were still extremely painful. When asked about that Mary spoke about how her painful ankles enticed her to come for prayer, and their continued pain kept her coming back...which provided God the opportunity to heal her in ways she didn't even know she needed. 'Just think of what I would have missed if my ankles had been healed that first night. God had something much more profound in mind for me than just my ankles.'"²

² Tilda Norberg and Robert D. Webber, "Stretch Out Your Hand", p. 24, 25.

Sister Mary came for the gift of healing her ankles, but what she found was the giver of life in deeper and more profound ways than she could ever have imagined. Isn't that the greatest gift, the greatest blessing, the greatest joy? Finding the giver. That is what life is all about.

I know a guy. This guy's name just so happens to be Guy. His dad was a Presbyterian pastor, so this Guy heard all about a guy named Jesus. In his teen years Guy rebelled a bit and drifted away. But Guy came back to this guy named Jesus. He didn't come back just for the gifts. He came back for the Giver. The Giver was with him as he served the church. The Giver was with him as he cared for his family, raising them to know Jesus Christ. The Giver was with him as he watched his wife get sick and eventually die. Through it all he found out the Giver was with him every step of the way.

When this Guy died, his family showed me some of his papers. Those papers turned out to be a bold statement of faith, faith in the Giver, faith in Jesus Christ. My friend Guy left instructions to begin his memorial service with a statement of faith. It is question one from the Heidelberg Catechism. Question one of the Heidelberg Catechism asks: What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

The answer to that question says it all. What is my only comfort in life and in death?

Answer: That I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood, has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Do you know a guy? Do you know a guy named Jesus? Do you know him not just for his gifts, but do you know him as the Giver? Naaman left Elisha with some dirt so he could spread it on the ground back home and bow down to worship God. One commentator said that was unsophisticated. Maybe so. But it was also pretty darn special. We know a guy who is our God. May we bow our hearts together in humble reverence and grateful adoration as we worship Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God.