

What's This Story All About? 2 Kings 5:1-14

What's this story about, anyway? Is it about the great general Naaman, who for all his greatness still had something wrong, this skin disease that disrupted his life? Is it about God's grace to foreigners? After all, that's how Jesus understood the story in Luke 4:27. Is it about the reputation of Elisha, the great prophet? After all, he does this healing so that folks will know there is indeed a prophet in Israel. Is it about a king who realizes he has no power to heal?

Or, is it, perhaps about something else as well?

The background of the story concerns contentious relations between Israel, and Aram, otherwise known as Syria. This story takes place after Israel had been divided in two, so now the capital city of Israel was Samaria.

There had been trouble brewing, and in fact in one battle the Arameans had won. Though they had not conquered Israel, they dominated Israel. And whenever they wanted, they would conduct pesky cross-border raids that Israel could not stop.

And in one of those raids, a young Israelite woman had been captured, and made a slave, slave to the wife of the great General Naaman. Now, of all the people in the story, she had the most reason to question God, to be disappointed in God. After all, He had not protected her from the

raid, had not rescued her from slavery.

But no matter. She believes. She believes that her God is the one God. She might be a captive, but her God is strong and powerful. And this is where we leave her for a bit as we turn to Naaman, the Aramean general.

Naaman. Great man and highly regarded. He was a winner.

And Naaman had it all. Except for one thing: he had leprosy. Go to any good Bible dictionary and you will be told that Leprosy in the Bible is different from Hansen's Disease, which is another word for leprosy as we understand it. Well, no matter. It was a skin disease, and no matter what your faith, it meant you had to live apart from society. There might even be a pun here, as in Hebrew, "general" and "leprosy" sound very much alike.

So here he is: the Greatest general around destined simply to live as well as he could in the midst of all this trouble and tribulation.

Now Naaman and his nation had faith in a God named Rimmon, but the notion that this god Rimmon would have any real power never entered his mind. Something is wrong? The great general never even dared imagine that any God could actually do anything about it.

But this unnamed slave girl had different ideas. Naaman's wife evidently mentions that he, for

all his greatness, had this overwhelming disease. And she, with pure faith and trust simply says, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

That's audacious faith. Back in days in which a god's power was measured by military victories, this woman enslaved by a military defeat dares to, "My God can do anything." And she trusted God would work through this prophet Elisha.

It's sort of like the faith of a four-year old child who proclaims, "My daddy is the strongest man in the world." The difference is, she was correct, as events were to prove.

Now, at this point, this slave woman drops out of the story. She proclaims her faith, and then we don't ever get to find out what happened to her. Like so many people in history, she sort of passes unnoticed from the scene.

But look at what her faith set in motion. You see, that's what we don't always realize: when we step out in faith, great things begin to happen, greater sometimes than we will ever know or can ever imagine.

What her faith sets in motion seems at first to be a diplomatic crisis.

Bible doesn't tell us so, but next chance the wife saw Naaman, she mentioned this to him. And he was ready to try anything. Goes to his King and says, let me go to Israel and get this checked

out.

Sure, go ahead. And so with all the proper protocol of diplomacy, the King of Aram sends Naaman with a letter, and a bribe, saying, "Dear king, please cure my general of leprosy."

The king of Israel receives this letter and he is not at all happy. You see, there are some things kings can do and some things only God can do.

Cure leprosy? What's this, a trick? When I can't cure him, will Aram take offense and invade to punish me? He tears his robe, sign of mourning. Notice the king, the king of Israel, of God's chosen people, chooses not to bring God into the equation.

Yet God enters the picture, through the prophet Elisha. Now Elisha is far from the most humble man of God ever put on earth. Elisha hears about all this, but doesn't go to see the king. Just sends him a note.

What's the big fuss? Have the general come see me. I'll take care of it. Rather, God will take care of it. And when Naaman is cured, he will know I am indeed a true prophet. Did you notice that Elisha isn't so interested in the fate of Israel or of his king or even of Naaman, but interested that people know who God is and who the prophet is?

Now, by not going to see the king directly, Elisha implies that he's as important as the King. And

now he's going to imply he's more important than this visiting general..

And so here comes Naaman. Big pageantry. Horses and chariots and soldiers and we can imagine trumpets blaring and voices shouting, behold here comes Naaman, general of the Arameans.

Elisha doesn't even bother to meet the General. Just sends out a flunky to say, "Wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and you will be cleansed and healed." What? No audience face to face? No spectacular show of force?

Now we folks who know symbolism know that the Jordan is the boundary between wilderness and promised land. And we know seven, speaks of creation itself and the God of creation. So Elisha is saying, claim God's presence in your life.

But Naaman doesn't know all that. In fact, he's cranky. Cranky that the prophet Elisha had not come out to greet him, great general that he was. And wash in that dinky river? Why back home, we've got much better Rivers, Abana and Pharpar, they're much better. I thought he would at least wave his hand over me, or something.

Sort of like the folks who move to town and tell you how much better everything was where they came from? Which makes you wonder why they even moved away? Or makes you want to say, "Delta's ready when you are."

And Naaman's ready to attack right then and there. What does he want to do with this God of the dinky River Jordan and this tottering nation?

But a servant points out to Naaman: if this prophet had told you to do something really difficult, wouldn't you have done it? So, why not go down and dip yourself seven times? What's there to lose?

Good point, Naaman thinks. So he goes to the Jordan, washes himself seven times, and is healed.

And his skin becomes that of a young boy's. Or, maybe like the skin of that young slave girl whose faith in God had set all this in motion to begin with.

Naaman was a great general. Won many victories. A war hero. But because of his leprosy, his life always had a certain emptiness about it, an emptiness that no king and no victory could fill. And emptiness that only God could fill.

And he never would have known, except for that audacious faith of a young slave girl, living far from home, yet close to the heart of God. She knew that for those days, God's power would be found in Elisha; we know today that power is found in our relationship with Jesus Christ, the living Son of God.

And may we be like that slave girl one to another, telling one another through our words, our actions, our attitudes, and our deeds, of the wondrous power of God to cleanse, to heal, to make new. For who knows what Godly stuff we ourselves might set in motion, when we share our faith with one another?

And maybe, just maybe, this is what the story is all about.