



Wrestling With Obedience

Rev Cate Thorn

2 Kings 5:1- 14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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There is much in today's readings, especially from Kings and the gospel that we could play with. Some years ago I attended a Ministry Conference that explored how to be and remain resourced to preach. It was led by Bp. Jim, which gives you an idea it was a wee while ago. One of the main pieces of advice was that each week one should choose only one of each thing. One reading, from it discern one message or theme, link it to one church doctrine, illustrate with one image and connect with one mission outcome. All fine and dandy, it's a pretty simple formula so from now on that's what I'll do, OK?

Then I thought about it. Sure, following such a methodology would be much simpler and straight forward, but I had a problem, when I read the scriptures I keep waiting for the punch line, the deeper wondering that opens me up a bit, the thing that bugs me so keeps me asking and searching. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing **WRONG** with the methodology. I could do that but it wouldn't be long before I was bored. I have to admit it also didn't seem to ask much of those who listened. But the advice/ suggestion is there so, even though the two readings draw me and in which I think there are some common themes my learning of the ministry conference flash warnings in my mind. I might just note and ignore for this week, perhaps slightly sprinkled with a seasoning of guilt for advice not quite taken.

One of the sensitivities about using only one text is that it preserves the integrity of that text within its context. A bit like assuming St John the Baptist was a Christian when, as far as we know, he remained always a

Jew, as Christians we can make mischief with the OT texts, suggest their sole purpose is to point to the events of Jesus. I think the nearer actuality is that the NT writings, the event of Jesus as Messiah, require the OT texts to make sense. I do want to consider both OT and Gospel passages today, even in light of such comment, because under the detail of the story I think there are some common themes – common to being human and common with our human wrestle to accommodate God.

Consider the story of Naaman, I think it is probably familiar to most of you, Naaman despite being man of stature, figure of military might and power has leprosy – actual a general term used for any undefined skin disease, so possibly leprosy as we know it. Other than debilitating health, there's also social stigma attached. For all his power, might and influence Naaman can't **do** anything about it. In a tight few verses the story is told. Nothing in this tale is as Naaman or the listener might expect. God speaks through captured slave girl, in servitude to Naaman's wife, through Elisha's servant, through Naaman's attendants – each of them people without power, with little or no stature or status. Cure is affected, quite independently of Naaman and all his capabilities, power, wealth and prestige. Hardest for him is obedience, submitting to simple instruction, engaging in a humble process indifferent to Naaman's self-regard. Sure, Naaman is healed of body, but perhaps more pertinently and a point of the story, Naaman the great and powerful is healed and made whole when he submits in obedience to Yahweh, the One beyond, eluding his knowing and control.

With respect to the human divine intersect such drama might make us ponder a thing or two. If we seek healing, to be made whole, do we harbour expectations of what that healing and wholeness will look like, of where to look and what we will find? Perhaps we imagine we make ourselves more likely to be healed if we undertake feats of courage or purity or holiness, go to remote places, imbibe rare, ancient curatives for we think our present resources inadequate. God's active presence is known in the world, even as what we need for healing, as Naaman's story illustrates, may not be as we expect or imagine. The ordinary overlooked things of everyday are more than adequate to reveal God who desires for

us to know ourselves whole, a wholeness given us that can neither be bought nor earned. Obedience to God seems key.

How might we understand that healing comes through obedience? It's pretty plain and simple in the Naaman story but it's sure never so plain and simple in real life. I wondered on this, being obedient is to act in accord with an instruction given, in outward expression. But we wouldn't act so if we didn't believe that **by** our action we'd achieve our desired outcome. Naaman needed, somehow, to believe that by doing as Elisha's servant instructed, and his servants urged, he **would** be healed, that the God who spoke through them would heal him and, despite his resistance it did.

I wonder whether our age of wearied cynicism has tarnished our capacity for obedience defined thus. Obedience to act believing God does act concretely in real time, that God outworks in real life, that something actually happens. To hold to and trust this as true suggests a resolute, resilient (not unwavering or undoubting) but tenacious holding to God – God who's trustworthy and true. Despite much evidence to the contrary, trusting that we're known in/to God, that we matter. God may not be revealed as we expect, by whom we expect, in ways we might expect but we **are** given and provided with what we need. As did Naaman, we may need the pragmatism of the odd companion or two to reveal to us what is under our noses.

To turn to the gospel, the sending of the 70 – ripple forward of OT tradition, Moses gathered and empowered 70 to help lead and guide the journeying Israelite community, God's Spirit fell on those gathered and 2 besides back at the camp. 70 is more than a random number, rather it implies sufficient are empowered and sent to be, bring, bear God presence to the community. And yes they're sent in two's - company, of course, this task needs support and encouragement of each other, it's not a task to be done alone. Ripple again of OT tradition that adds depth and richness, for testimony to be valid two must bear witness.

The 70 sent are commanded to go, not asked if they'd like to, volunteers for the task are not recruited, these are told to go. This is not a sending of

self-dependence, not a sending of pre-planned expectation, not a journey of self-aggrandisement. This is not about those sent, to an extent not about what is achieved. It's about obedience to being sent to do God's work, trusting ourselves to the process. Trusting we are what God needs, our adequacy sufficient for it depends not on us but on God. We're sent as bearers of, takers to, we are necessary. Through what we bring, how we bring and are bearers of God, the message "God's kingdom is near" is heard. How that is received, the transformation of people's hearts, isn't in our hands.

So, yes, these are very different drama's from very different contexts but it seems to me they speak something in common, something really difficult for those of us who profess and try to live a life of faith in an age of spiritual indifference. The tangible actuality that our life is dependent on God, as much as that defies reasoned-ability. We do receive all that we need to flourish and together we're adequate for the task of revealing God presence already in the world.