

immersed in God's love
 a sermon preached on the
fourth sunday after pentecost
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 at
st john's
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: 2 Kings 5.1-14, Psalm 66, Galatians 6.7-18, Luke 10: 1-12, 17-24

Despite the fact that many people believe that slavery no longer exists, an estimated five million children are in slavery worldwide. Child slavery includes;

- Children used by others for profit, often through violence, abuse and threats, in prostitution or pornography, forced begging, petty crime and the drug trade
- Forced child labour, for example in agriculture, factories, construction, brick kilns, mines, bars, the tourist industry or domestic work
- Children forced to take part in armed conflicts
- Children forced to marry¹

The girl in today's story from the second book of Kings is a child slave. She has been captured by raiding soldiers and now serves the wife of the commander of the army. She has been taken from her family, her culture and her land and made a slave. From a human perspective, she has absolutely no power. She is young, a woman, a foreigner and a slave. Naaman her owner, on the other hand, is a senior man in the royal court, the commander of the army, a respected, powerful, pillar of his society.

This huge divide in power is the way our story begins. However, God doesn't see people in the way that the world does. This young slave girl is an Israelite. She worships the one, true God, and when we read about her, we are meant to understand that being a servant of Yahweh utterly eclipses human circumstances. Despite the way it looks, she is far more powerful than Naaman and has resources at her disposal of which he is completely unaware.

And this is amazing, because the resources at Naaman's disposal are vast! Personally, he is a mighty warrior, commander of the Aramean army and in high favour with the king (2 Kings 5.1). When he goes to see Elisha, he goes with the authority of a letter from the king, arriving in a mighty procession of horses and chariots and bringing with him piles of silver, and gold, and ten suits of clothing as gifts. It is quite a show! It obviously terrifies the king of Israel who assumes that the king of Aram is using all this pomp and circumstance to set him up to fail so that the king of Aram can have an excuse to attack him again.

But, just as the apparent powerlessness of the young Israelite slave is outweighed by the power of Yahweh, the apparent power of Naaman is outweighed by the fact that he is a leper.

In the ancient world, a range of skin diseases came under the general heading of *leprosy* so we don't know for sure that Naaman suffered from what today we would call Hansen's disease. However, all these conditions were feared as they rendered the person who suffered from them ritually unclean and meant that they were ostracised from society.

¹ <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/child-slavery/>

Naaman's high status probably protected him from some of the prejudice he would otherwise have experienced, but his situation was similar to that of someone in the '80s suffering from HIV. People would have believed that his affliction was a sign of sin. They would have been afraid to touch him, afraid to share his fate.

Naaman's terrible situation makes him desperate to be healed. He has power and privilege but ultimately, money can't buy happiness and he longs to have fullness of life. He wants to be made whole.

It would have been unusual for a man of Naaman's power to listen to a message from a slave girl, passed on via his wife, but perhaps it is his desperation that enables him to hear. Perhaps, this ability to humble himself and to receive help from those less powerful and important than himself is the first step, the beginning of his journey to wholeness.

If listening to the voice of a slave girl was the beginning, then his journey continued when he reached Elisha's house. The prophet didn't even come outside to speak to him! No wonder Naaman was angry. He had come a long way only to have a messenger sent out to him.

It can be hard to attempt that first, difficult step towards someone to ask them for help. How much worse to make your best effort and then feel brushed aside! Naaman had come to Elisha after listening to a slave girl, but Elisha's response, sent via a servant, was so off-hand that Naaman may even have wondered if he had been heard at all.

Once again, it is the voice of some more servants that helps Naaman. Courageous servants who approach their angry commander and say;

Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?

Good and sensible advice, but difficult to follow for a powerful man used to a life of action.

When I was a girl, I loved reading about the heroes and gods of Ancient Greece. The greatest of all the heroes was Hercules, the human son of Zeus. Great though he was, Hercules, had killed his wife and children. In order to atone for his actions, the god Apollo sent him to complete twelve labours in the service of his cousin, King Eurystheus.

The labours of Hercules included tasks such as; slaying the nine-headed hydra, capturing the Cretan bull, and capturing and bringing back the three headed monster Cerberus.

Anyone who completed that 'to do' list would certainly feel they had achieved something!

Leprosy was as feared in the ancient world as some of the monsters with whom Hercules did battle and some of the treatments that were attempted sound just as horrific.

Blood was used, as a beverage or as a bath. Sometimes, because of the belief that leprosy was associated with impurity, this was specifically the blood of children or virgins. By the 1700s, the blood of dogs or lambs was favoured, although sometimes the blood from dead bodies was also used.

Other ancient treatments involved the use of venom from snakes, scorpions or frogs. As late as the 20th century, increasing doses of bee stings (up to 4,000!) were tried, as was the excreta of the climbing fish.

The leprosy person's skin could also be scarified, with or without the use of irritants such as arsenic.

And, in the Middle Ages, castration was practised.²

It wasn't until 1941 that an effective treatment was found for leprosy, and even that required the person seeking a cure to undergo multiple, painful injections.³

Naaman was insulted by the humiliating simplicity of Elisha's instructions to him. With treatments such as those I have just described in mind, I wonder what he would have been prepared to try in order to be cured!

However, once again, Naaman listens and is obedient. He goes down to the Jordan river to bathe seven times in its muddy waters. Elisha's instructions for Naaman to bathe seven times echo the rituals of Leviticus 14 that lay out what a priest must do to pronounce someone with leprosy to be clean again.

And he shall sprinkle it [the blood and the water] seven times on him who is to be cleansed from the leprosy and shall pronounce him clean (Leviticus 14.7a).

The powerful commander makes himself vulnerable and steps into the river. I imagine that after the fanfare surrounding his arrival, everyone must have been there to watch!

What must it have been like for Naaman? Although the action he was required to perform was simple and physically painless, I imagine it must have been costly to do.

The first couple of times perhaps he simply gritted his teeth and went down into the water. Was he starting to feel annoyed by the third and fourth time? Was his anxiety growing as he waded out for a fifth and sixth time? How long did he stand on the bank of the river before going in for the seventh and final time? Did he wonder if he was about to discover that he had made a fool of himself for nothing? Did he consider remaining as he was rather than risking that the seventh cleansing might achieve no more than the preceding six?

Whatever he might have felt, he went down into the Jordan River one last time and emerged clean and whole.

I wonder if, like me, you sometimes believe that things can only be made right through an enormous effort. Entrusting oneself to God is, after all, such a simple thing to be asked to do; surely that can't be enough to fix me. God's mercy makes it so easy to be made whole, but human nature wants there to be something really hard to achieve, something that lets us know that achievement comes through striving; something like the labours of Hercules.

The belief that everyone must decide on a course of independent action and push on against all resistance is strongly reinforced in our culture. Just do it! There is no gain without pain. No guts, no glory. Fortune favours the brave.

And of course, we do need to act. It was only after Naaman made the physical and emotional journey to seek God through Elisha that he could be healed. But Naaman's wholeness did not come through his own efforts except insofar as they led him to accept the simple but difficult command to be immersed in God's love and to accept God's grace.

We read about this same kind of tension in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Some of the Jewish Christians have been pressuring the Gentile Christians to follow the Law of Moses as part of becoming Christian. It is understandable that they would understand Christianity through their Jewish faith, but

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_leprosy

³ <https://web.stanford.edu/class/humbio103/ParaSites2005/Leprosy/history.htm>

they are having ongoing difficulty in accepting that God's love is a free gift and does not have to be earned.

The good news that we have in Christ is that there are no legal barriers to be jumped, no horrific treatments to be undergone, no labours to be performed. We don't have to have anything we can boast about. We don't have to be strong, powerful or important. We don't have to be free from sin or free from doubts. We don't have to have all the answers; we don't even have to have all the questions. To receive the gift of God's grace, all we have to do is know that we need it and ask.

Let me read to you Eugene Petersen's interpretation of today's passage from Galatians:

For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do – It is what *God* is doing, and is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God—his chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!⁴

The Lord be with you.

⁴ Galatians 6.14-16, adapted from Eugene Petersen's *The Message*.