

If Only...

This morning's text finds us in a divided kingdom. The golden era of Solomon's reign is now a long ago dream. Israel is the kingdom to the north; Judah lies to the south. They are now enemy states at peace for the moment, with other enemies on every side. We are also now in the time when prophets rise up not to gaze on crystal balls and speculate about the future, but to speak God's truth into the current moment, a truth those in power often do not want to hear. Moments ago we met Elisha, the successor to one of Israel's most famous prophets, Elijah. The story of Naaman's healing is part of a larger collection of accounts of Elisha's power as a healer, a man of God. And this episode at least reads like a script for a play on a stage.

Naaman appears in verse 1 and is described as a commander in the king of Syria's army, a great warrior who has known victory and success on the battlefield. And yet, he has leprosy, or some kind of skin condition that is uncomfortable and likely unsightly. Clearly, he wants to be healed. The next voice we hear is one of an unnamed slave girl, a captive from Israel. Then there are the kings of Aram and Israel. And finally there are more servants, or slaves as the Hebrew reads who complete the cast. While we are given much more detail about Naaman and the king of Israel's melodramatic and almost comic response to Naaman's request, I find myself wanting to know more about the slave girl. She has no name; she has no earthly power, and yet without her words, we have no story, and Naaman still has leprosy. With the one phrase, "If only..." his healing begins. Even in the midst of captivity and oppression, this unnamed, unknown girl points the way to the one true God and to the source of her captor's healing. Because you know Naaman has tried everything else. A man such as him has access to every trick in the book, every snake oil imaginable. I imagine that he has tried it all, and still he suffers. And one could rightly imagine that this girl who has been forcibly taken from her home and her family might actually savor his suffering. Instead, she offers a word of hope, THE word of hope and healing that Naaman has needed all along.

It takes him a bit of time to get there of course. He does not go straight to the man of God but to his king, who in turn sends him to the king of Israel. Even the king of Israel, the one who should know what is

going on misses the message at first. He thinks the Syrian king is trying to pick a fight, seeking to set him up and undo their tenuous truce. Only when the king tears his clothes and makes a spectacle does Elisha catch wind of the drama and ask that Naaman be sent to him. Then Elisha does not even bother to leave his tent. He sends out simple instructions, and now it is Naaman's turn to lose it. In his tantrum he almost walks away from his one true chance to be healed. He thinks he is worthy of a grand show, and he is put out with the suggestion that he will find healing in the muddy waters of the pitiful Jordan. Again, it is the voice of unknown slaves who draw him back. It is the whispers of unnamed and overlooked people, the more-than-ordinary ones who convince him that the prophet's plan is worth a shot.

This morning we are celebrating All Saints' Sunday when we give thanks for our dear ones who have died this past year. It is also a time when we pause and give thanks for the ones who have come before us in faith and the ones who share the journey with us now, the ones who have pointed us back to the one true God, the ones who have told us and shown us what it is to be faithful, whether we know their names or not.

As Jay Slagle returned from covering a high school cross country race in McCool Junction, Nebraska, he could not shake one question, "Who was that kid in last place?" After delving a bit he learned the story of Noah Lambrecht, a child who was adopted from the hospital after he had been abandoned and left behind because his birth parents were no doubt overwhelmed and overmatched by his staggering health problems. He was born with a host of issues, not the least of which was that the vessels to his heart were not connected correctly. After multiple surgeries, Noah's new parents were permitted to take him home. Doctors did not expect him to survive until his first birthday. But survive he did, and in the spring of seventh grade he said he wanted to run cross country in the fall. His parents, Gaylord and Sheri thought he'd get over that idea over the summer, but he didn't, and come fall he laced up alongside his classmates. In middle school the races were only a mile long, so his coming in a few minutes behind the other runners didn't get much notice. When he laced up for the high school team, things were different and people began to worry. Noah had never run three miles before. He had a pacemaker. He would be last or almost last at every meet. But then, Slagle writes:

Just before Noah's first high school meet, the upperclassmen approached Coach Underwood with a question. 'After we finish our race, can we go back and run with Noah? He could use our help.' Coach

Underwood responded that they could run with Noah as long as they didn't give him a competitive advantage over a nearby runner. At that first meet in Superior, a handful of teammates joined Noah to run his last 800 meters. Not cheering, not giving sympathy. Just running with a new member of their family.¹

Noah still finishes eight to ten minutes behind everyone else, and his teammates, even ones who have now headed to college still encourage him and run alongside when they come home to visit. But here's the piece that floors me: runners from other schools run alongside him, too. Slagle writes:

For a boy who finishes last more often than not, it was impossible for Noah to fit all of his cross-country highlights into a fifty-minute phone interview. A few stand out. At Hebron's meet, the football players practice in the morning so they can cheer on their home team in the afternoon. McCool Junction runs that meet every year. At this year's meet, two Hebron football players wearing blue jeans and boots were the first to join Noah. Then his teammates, then runners from other schools. By the finish line, there were 75 to 80 runners with him. It's always just kids, and never adults. The adults are too busy crying.²

Noah is amazing and inspiring, but I am inspired by these unnamed students, too. They stand to gain nothing from running alongside Noah. And yet, these students, these children, like that slave girl come alongside anyway.

One of you pointed out this past week that the reference to Elisha's story taking place in a divided nation struck a chord, because we are, too. And yet, lest we forget, we are also children of the covenant, children of God. *That* is our most fundamental and essential identity. Like the slave girl in Naaman's household we too know where the healer lives, we know with whom the healing lies. Someone, somewhere pointed the way for us. Someone, somewhere raced alongside us when we were panting for breath. Someone, somewhere gave us hope for tomorrow when the way ahead seemed dark and foreboding. Someone, somewhere whispered, "If only..." Someone, somewhere, dared to suggest that we give faith a try. Like the slave girl and the slaves along

¹ <https://ovalsandtrails.com/blog/2018/10/19/the-runner-with-the-broken-heart>

² <https://ovalsandtrails.com/blog/2018/10/19/the-runner-with-the-broken-heart>

for the ride, like the football players in cowboy boots from a rival team, those someones stood to gain nothing for showing us the way. There was nothing in it for them, and yet because of their testimony, because of their witness we, too, have found ourselves being healed.

We will close worship singing one of my mother's favorite hymns, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." To some the lyrics about meeting other saints "in shops or at tea" are a bit silly or trivial, but I find hope there. Because I am not Elisha or Paul or Peter. I am not Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mr. Rogers. And heaven knows, I am not Jesus. Not even close. But in the whisper of an unknown slave girl I am reminded that I, too, know the one who alone can bring healing, so I too can be a saint for someone. We need saints everywhere all the time, but in a divided kingdom, we need them desperately. I do not own a halo, but I do own running shoes and a couple of pairs of cowboy boots. Maybe it's my turn to put them on, to follow the children's lead, to run alongside a stranger or a member of the opposing team and offer a word of healing, too. "If only..."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.