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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

2 Kings 5

21 August 2022

A Bold Servant Girl

Opening Prayer: Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning to all of you who join us online this morning. Welcome to all of our guests this morning. May your time with us fill you up with grace and hope.

Please join me in prayer: Great creator, Lord of heaven and earth, empower us to see and hear your scriptures anew this morning. May these stories of children illuminate more of your all-consuming love and unending grace as we seek to live into and share the way of Jesus. Amen.

Message: Summer of stories 2022. Stories of children in the Bible. We have explored seven stories thus far in our journey: Cain and Abel, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses and Miriam, Samuel, a widow's son in the northern kingdom of Israel, and Jesus. Each story has opened conversations and reflections for us to carry into the week ahead of us as we share the love of Jesus with all around us. We have heard about and sat with the messy parts of life: enmity between siblings, rightful heirs to the family legacy, murder and jealousy, genocide, greed for power, judgment (though not always what we have in mind), hunger, hopelessness, and desperation. These stories, more often than not, have shown how dark and twisted and insufferable the human experience can become, but they also show that God does not wait on us to get our acts together so that God can act in love and hope. We have found that God can redeem even the worst of circumstances, creatively bringing new life, safety, sustenance, freedom, justice, and enough. We have seen the

not have a name because she is supposed to represent all those from Israel's history who had been taken captive by an enemy and used by the neighboring nations most powerful people.

Her master, Naaman, is a great military leader, blessed by Israel's god, YHWH or the Lord, with military success, but his success has been over-shadowed by a skin disease, possibly modern-day leprosy or Hansen's disease, but most likely any number of skin ailments that were common at the time. In some ways, this disease or illness is an important reminder to Naaman that his power and prestige can only protect him from so much, but it cannot necessarily protect his health. Illness has left him powerless, which is one of the main themes of the story: the powerful brought low and exposed for their incompetence, while the weakest are raised up for their wisdom and resolve.

We notice this theme of reversal come through most clearly in the servant-girl's boldness and kindness. She empathizes with her master's condition and speaks up to his wife, confessing that he could find healing in Samaria if he were to stand before God's great prophet there. In some sense, she is sticking her neck out, offering advice to someone who could easily be rid of her in a moment's notice. Strikingly, the rest of the story is how her single sentence – "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." - bears itself out in the midst of the power-hungry, proud, broken, distorted, arrogant, and greedy world of international relations and presumption.

Note too that no other female speaks in the story besides her, and she is proven right even amidst all of the discussion among the powerful men that are disputing her claim. Her comment is shown to be the foolishness of the powerful and the wisdom of the weak: the kings of Aram and Israel bumble around each other trying to figure out whose national healthcare system is really capable of offering healing; the great military leader is forced to lower himself to the

direction or instruction of a prophet's messenger, not even the prophet himself; and the prophet's own household is exposed for its greed and susceptibility to corruption when Elisha's own servant tries to lie both to Naaman and his master Elisha in order to gain his own .

It is only when humility and obedience become the norm for the most powerful that the story takes a turn for the better. What has been a requirement all along for those on the bottom of the social ladder is finally realized by those who have never had to answer to anyone. The servants have always had to be submissive, obedient, reverent, and humble, but suddenly, their masters are required the same because we are all image-bearers of the living God, the one who brings Naaman healing in his seven-time muddy baptism in the Jordan River. We might hear ringing notes of Miriam's song in Exodus or of Mary's Magnificat in Luke, that the mighty will be brought low, and the lowly will be lifted up.

We do not hear if Naaman goes back to his house and praises his servant for her wisdom and insight. Only two verses of the story mention her, but we also would not have the story that we do if she would not have spoken. So, If we think about the story in another way, we might notice all of the unintended consequences of a few simple words. As we walk through the story, we see all of the possibilities that were not enacted because a character chose a different path. Early in the story, the kings of Israel and Aram could have gone to war over whose healthcare system was better or really capable of healing Naaman. The King of Israel could have ignored Elisha's request to send Naaman to him. Elisha could have given Naaman what he wanted, a grand religious ceremony and healing, paid for with the generous gifts of Aram's king. Gehazi could have seen the wisdom in his master Elisha's refusal to take Naaman's gifts and then let Naaman head back to his own home. But, where Naaman's servants offer wisdom and insight both in mentioning Elisha and in encouraging their master to do what Elisha says, Elisha's

servant reveals his deepest desires, to have status and honor, respect and admiration as Elisha does, but he doesn't realize that Naaman's riches and wealth will never get him what he wants and will serve to reinforce what the story is already saying: God cannot be bought or bribed by the powerful to bring about what they want or think they need. Naaman came for what he thought that he needed, but he received far more healing from the prophet than he expected. Gehazi thought he knew what he needed, but what he got revealed his arrogance.

It is in this moment at the end of the story as Gehazi walks away with the Naaman's illness that we have come full-circle back to the captive young woman in Naaman's household. If it were not for the foolishness of the proud, arrogant, power-hungry, greedy, violent, and corrupted people around her, she would still be with her family in Israel, not serving a foreign military leader and his family. We can bring it to the present as we think of refugees and civilians caught up in military conflict around the world that if it were not for a twisted sense of pride or honor or reputation, maybe we would not have the humanitarian crises that we do across the globe as refugees and migrants seek safety and well-being anywhere possible.

Closing prayer:

Let's pray: God of hope and transformation, we ask for healing as Naaman sought; healing of heart, soul, mind, and body as we follow in the way of our teacher and Lord, Jesus the Christ. We pray for all of those who have been and continue to be victims of violence and war around the world. Give us empathy and compassion like the Naaman's bold servant that we would see the ways that we can work for peace and lift up the powerless. In Jesus name. Amen.