

“I Know a Healing God”

1 Kings 5:1-14

© Stacey Steck

Preached Sunday, July 8, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

I remember a story from my childhood about a certain little boy and a truck. It seems that an eighteen-wheeler that was a little too tall for a bridge tried to go through it anyway, and, surprise, surprise, it got stuck. Traffic of course, backed up while all the interested parties worked on loosing the truck from its bondage. People had all kinds of suggestions, none of which worked, and so the tension began to rise. The little boy watched all of this from the back seat of his parents' car with a certain amusement, because watching chickens run around without their heads is always kind of amusing. The little boy kept telling his parents that he knew how to get the truck unstuck but they told him that the experts would fix the problem and when he persisted, they finally just ignored him. Well, the experts finally ran out of solutions, threw up their hands, scratched their heads, and shouted out in despair, “Whatever will we do,” at which point the little boy rolled down his window and shouted back, “Let the air out of the tires!” which of course they did, and everybody went home happily ever after.

Maybe you too have had that exquisite little feeling when you know something someone else needs to know but no one bothers to ask your opinion. You know, that smug sort of feeling while you watch the tension rise and you wait for the headless chickens to realize that the answer is right in front of them, if they

would just think outside the box? The real reward is when, with the answer you have finally supplied, the problem is solved, and you are asked with some consternation, “why didn’t you tell us that in the first place,” and you get to respond, “Well, you never asked!” Sinful as it may be, smugness is indeed one of life’s warm fuzzies. Now, it might be unfair to say that the unnamed Israelite servant girl of the Aramean general Naaman was feeling smug just about the time she let his wife know about her little Samaritan secret, but we also might imagine she had been watching this military household do everything in its power, and failing miserably, to rid the King’s servant of leprosy, or whatever dread skin disease was afflicting him. We might imagine her watching from silent shadows as the lowest of the low, a slave captured from the enemy, a true nobody who may have never spoken unless spoken to, someone who would have had every right to keep her secret to herself and watch the enemy waste away, his family left to suffer through their loss as her family had suffered through theirs when she was taken away. But somehow, from a place of compassion, or at least national honor, she musters the unsolicited piece of information that in Samaria is found salvation. “If only my lord were with the prophet in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” “I know a healing God,” she might have phrased it, as she realized that on a scale of sins, it is certainly better to be smug than vindictive.

There are many unnamed, yet vitally important, persons in the Bible, most of them women. If you want to know more about them, Edith Deen’s landmark 1955

book, “All the Women of the Bible,” not only offers them a biography but gives them their moment in the sun. The “young girl” in this story, likely even pre-pubescent is, as many commentators have observed, the lynchpin in the story, the character without whom Naaman would have continued to decline in his disease. Interestingly, this is a story full of amazingly important words spoken by remarkably unimportant people, not only this young girl, but the prophet Elisha’s servant who brings his master’s words of healing, and Naaman’s own servants, who convince him to humble himself enough to wade into Jordan’s waters. The main characters are, for a change, in the background: the Israelite King who only worries about the political implications of the request of his Aramean counterpart, and Elisha who doesn’t bother to answer the door when Naaman comes calling. It is not as though the power players do nothing in the story, but rather that each of the “lesser” characters plays a larger role in the greater drama, that of demonstrating the mercy as well as dominance of Israel’s God’s in the context of the contest for the hearts and minds of Israel’s people.

In a lesson which self-important preachers and politicians alike should be required to revisit frequently, it is then the “little people” that matter in matters of church and state, or more locally, faith and neighborhood, the little people without big pulpits or large soap boxes who have the trust of others and the courage to speak their convictions. While presidents posture for political and military position, the citizenry plants responsibility and civility. While the preachers

pontificate, the people in the pew are planting hope and healing. There is a witness in this story to the influence of “we the people” (to use language from the great historical documents of the United States) in transforming lives and changing communities. If nothing ever changes, it is only we who are to blame, for if we, in our day and age, with all of our technology and free speech and means of communication, cannot muster the courage or pride to point out the obvious, as did that young girl when she said, “I know a healing God,” well then, shame on us.

If we wanted to be cynical about her profession of faith, and perhaps justify ourselves at the same time, we could say that she did it hoping for a reward, maybe that she would be set free for having provided this information. We can rationalize our own inaction by calling into question the motivation of someone else’s action. If we are more honest with ourselves, we will simply admit that we are all bound up in ways great and small by our life’s circumstances, and those challenges, and those conflicts of interest, and those fears of rejection that paralyze us when we have the opportunity to speak a word of healing. And if those weren’t enough, we also have those limitations that our social and economic standing have imposed on us, and so each of us will always have a certain set of reasons why we will find it difficult to say, when the time comes (and it comes all the time!), “I know a healing God,” or “I know a just God,” or “I know a God of peace or of love or of mercy.” We all have our moments of being advocates for the reign of God but it is also to state the obvious that we are limited by those fears or prejudices or conflicts

of interest that keep us silent, or perhaps even in ignorant opposition to God's purposes, for were it *not* so, what a wonderful world we would already live in.

But I do not want to dwell on the reasons we do not offer the authentic word when we could. Rather, I am more interested in how we can develop the capacity to do. For that, I think there are lessons to be learned from the young girl in today's story, lessons that will help us overcome whatever emotions or inclinations prevent us from saying, "I know the God who has the cure for what ails you." You see, if that ten or eleven year old girl could speak such a truth, certainly you or I can do it. That she should do it without being asked is all the more powerful and compelling; "I know a healing God" is not an easy thing to say no matter the context, but given her context, all the more remarkable. What then, made it possible for her?

One answer which can be easily construed by the story is that it was a moment of national (and therefore religious) pride that could not be contained, that despite her lack of years, she was so full of a knowledge and pride of her God and her God's chosen people that she simply had to blurt it out. Clearly the gods of Aram had struck out, just like Baal had struck out in the stories of Elijah; Naaman had not been cured by the best efforts of Aram's physicians and holy men. Despite his high position in the royal court, there was no faith healing for him. But she had heard of Elisha's abilities somehow, and even implicitly linked those abilities to God's ability to heal the sick and free the prisoner. She must have known the stories of the Exodus and of Kings David and Solomon. She must have known how

slow to anger is our God and how full of steadfast love the God of Israel truly is. In light of the absence of all those wonderful qualities in the Aramean gods, despite that nation's power and wealth, those of her own God must have been the source of great pride and strength as she labored in an enemy's house. Was she perhaps deservedly a little smug? Maybe, but not so much that she prevented that God from being revealed to Naaman. And so here's the question for us: Are we so well versed in the deeds of our God -- Father, Son *and* Holy Spirit -- that we naturally effuse enthusiasm for that God's role in the lives of those we see struggling around us, even without being asked? Or are we content to simply own that God and smugly watch from our comfortable life raft as others slowly sink below the waves that are overtaking them? Are we proud of our God?

Another possible source of strength of that young girl was a more finely honed sense of compassion, born from her own experience of suffering and loss. It may be sad, but it is also true, that we often learn more of value from our losses than our triumphs. When we look back over our lives, we can often more easily notice times of great personal and spiritual growth coinciding with times of great adversity or suffering, rather than times of tranquility and prosperity. The trick is, of course, to be able to translate our own experiences into an empathy which liberates us to care for others, rather than a bitterness which closes us off to their struggles. It is never easy to revisit a painful past, and it can be tempting to leave it buried, but in a divine irony, our power is inversely proportional to the depth of our

suffering. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the death of Jesus Christ, ironically the greatest victory the world has ever known. Centuries before that pivotal event, and again despite her tender years, our heroine has managed to embody this truth and speaks those valuable words, “I know a healing God,” to someone else enduring profound suffering. It becomes our challenge to delve deeper and deeper into own own suffering, and Christ’s own suffering, so that we might meet the needs of the world’s suffering.

Perhaps there are other possibilities for why she did what she did, but truly, it is enough that she has lit the way for us. It is enough that she simply pointed Naaman’s wife in the right direction and didn’t do it all herself. It is enough that she makes only this brief appearance in Scripture and doesn’t go on to be the king’s wife. It is enough that she did this wonderful thing and was neither named nor thanked. It is enough that she knew her God so intimately as to know that even a foreigner bent on destroying her own people was not beyond the reach of that God’s love, power, or mercy. May we, without smugness, without pity, without moral superiority, but also without a lack of self-confidence or self-esteem, follow her example and point out the obvious and let God do the rest. Amen.