

# Power From Below

## *GOD's Alternative Power Source*

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Proper 9C | 2 Kings 5:1-14, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

We're given a gift today. On this weekend, as our minds turn toward celebration, toward powerful images of freedom and liberty, of safety and unity, in our annual remembering of our first expression of power and might as a people, on this weekend, we are offered lessons of humility and the failure of human power.

It is the sort of artful coincidence I'm not sure is as intentional as it is fortunate.

In our first story from 2 Kings, we meet Naaman, a military commander of a mighty army. Arguably the 2nd most powerful man in his world, after the king. The man Naaman calls Lord.

We get this image of a powerful man and we must know that there is something coming. A big ol' but... As is in this guy is so powerful, but... And Naaman's big ol' but is that he has leprosy. That's a big but!

The hearer gets the problem immediately. There is a contradiction between the man's powerful station and his powerlessness to his own fate. Hearers would know that this is something worth noticing. That even a mighty warrior, a man thousands call their Lord, even he is vulnerable. And that for many, this is proof of judgment against him by his god.

But that isn't how our GOD works.

### The Servant Girl.

So how is Naaman going to get out of this? He gets a tip from a slave, taken in a military conquest and given to his wife. The girl suggests Naaman go to the prophet in Samaria. Of course, this prophet is Elisha who will appear later.

Notice how she calls the mighty Naaman

"lord." The chain of command, the authority of hierarchy of everyone calling the next one up "lord." How this powerless girl: a female, a slave: is the only one who can get Naaman the help he needs. He won't find it from his king.

### The Power.

Naaman won't buy into it, though. Not fully. He heads to Samaria with a letter from the king of Aram to the king of Israel. That's how powerful people communicate: with each other.

And Naaman takes along with him ten talents of silver, 6,000 shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. Talents and shekels are measurements of weight. 1 talent is between 65 and 75 pounds, so ten is 650-750 pounds. 6,000 shekels of gold is about 150 pounds. Then ten sets of garments on top of that. Half of my closet. Naaman is traveling with nearly half a ton of wealth with an entourage who can carry it. For what?

An expression of power. It's what powerful people do. They show how powerful they are to other powerful people.

### The Powerless.

Now, Naaman, when he gets to Israel, brings his lord's letter to the lord of Israel and what happens? This king freaks out. His response is essentially *I have political power - I don't have the kind of power you need.*

Notice how the king understands the situation. He takes this request as an expression of political power. It is a threat to him and to his sovereign power. He thinks another king is

threatening him, asking him to give them what is not his to give. He can't see this as one king sending one of his own to another king for help.

All the trappings of power have left the king thinking this is all about power.

Elisha, the prophet, reaches out to the king and tells him to send Naaman his way. And when Naaman shows up, Elisha sends a messenger to tell him how GOD will heal him.

Naaman takes this as a slap in the face. *Bad ideas from an impudent man who can't bother to show his face. If it were just a matter of washing in the river, I could've done that already.* One could imagine him adding the question "Doesn't he know who I am?"

This powerful man can't see how he's weak. And how powerful the weak can be.

## Power.

This story is rich in its image of how we are to understand power and influence: in our world and also in GOD's kindom. Our own expressions of wealth, like when we keep up with the Joneses or flaunt our brand names are a problem. So is our judgment about how people below us spend their money.

One of the most painful experiences I had working for Habitat for Humanity was going to the events which should be our happiest. After finishing a house, we would gather, often shortly after the family has moved in, and we, as a community would bless the house.

Our house blessings were half celebration and half honoring the commitments of these volunteers and new homeowners.

And if you know anything about Habitat, it functions in this interesting space of who it seeks to serve. If my memory serves me right, each person applying for a home must make at least 50% of the median income for the area. And no more than 75%. They must make enough to be able to afford the low-cost loan we offered. But not so much that they could get a regular loan.

We sought to thread the needle between these two groups. Those who couldn't afford a house and those who couldn't get loans.

Our people, even our most committed volunteers, didn't always understand what that would mean in real life.

We would gather at the new home, excited and full of hope. And someone would comment about the TV in the living room or that they possessed a computer. Or that they could afford a car from the last decade. As if our work was to serve who they thought counted as "truly" poor. Poor as they defined the word. They got to choose who is deserving.

The power and influence critiqued in this story, the power of the powerful to dictate the terms and conditions, is turned on its head. Because the powerless have no power to help themselves. Even when he commands a mighty army.

## Slaves, Servants, Disciples.

In our story from Kings, we have a reversal of power: political, economic, influence. It is Elisha who sends a messenger to him. Note how it's not a servant or a slave. Perhaps a disciple or a friend. One bringing good news of healing and hope.

It is Naaman's servants who convince him to listen and be healed. It was his wife's servant who got this thing going in the first place. Not a thing his power and wealth and influence could get him. It is what the powerless offer to him.

## Disciples.

Jesus has been preparing his disciples for the mission since calling them back in chapter 5. He brought them and called them apostles. He taught them and showed them what their ministry would look like.

In chapter 9 Jesus speaks to the twelve, his closest, the in-group, and gives them the mission and power to heal. So they go and it works and they are super surprised. Now in chapter 10 he sends out all his disciples, all 70 of them, one for every country in the known world, to go out to all those nations of the world.

When they get back they show how amazed they are that it worked. We would be,

wouldn't we? Exorcising demons and healing the sick. Making miracles happen. I think we'd be surprised, too.

We'd come changed. Pumped. Ready to go. And Jesus calms them down a little and reminds them about the point. It isn't glory. It isn't feeling good about what we've done. It's about knowing that what we've done is what GOD loves to see. That we are making GOD happy.

Healing and reconciling and bringing people home.

## Slaves

These are the people GOD uses. Because the rest have power already. The kings and lords of the world, the commanders of armies and commanders of wealth have power and influence already. They can make things happen and gain an audience with other kings and commanders.

But it is these low men and women, girls and boys who speak for GOD. A slave and servants. Elisha as a servant of his lord and the LORD.

Messengers, disciples all. But they don't come as equals, as people; they come up from below. They come up from their station, from their class and they appear before them with nothing. No clothes, no 1/2 ton of cash. No extra sandals or backpacks full of trail mix and Gatorade.

They stand before the powerful and tell them they can be healed by a GOD more powerful than any human being. Healed. Wash and be clean.

## Healing.

A big part of the American myth is this hardscrabble history of ours. That we are the little guy coming up from below to gain our freedom. It's an enduring story and part of our understanding of who we are. But it isn't just the little guys against an Empire. The gospel is revealed in servants, slaves, and disciples who **don't** use the power of empire to overthrow an empire. Or replace one empire for another.

The good news isn't found in the physical freedom waged in war. But the spiritual growth waged through reconciling and healing the whole world.

We're already seeing two candidates courting the votes of the American people, explaining how faithful they are. And the position we'll elect one of them to will grant them enough power to destroy the world with a phone call.

While the powerful look to the other powerful to solve our problems, we have a gospel which encourages us not to look at them to do it for us. But for us to solve our problems together.

We are to reconcile with one another. With our community. With our outcasts and all brought low. For our place is way down here. Where the work is dirtiest and the rewards are the cheapest and money can't buy us dignity but an offer of dignity can get us anywhere.

Our work is healing. It isn't just being nice and letting it all go, just being happy. It isn't about overpowering each other and pushing each other around with our certainty. And I hate to say it this close to July 4th, but it is not about freedom and independence. It is about Dependence on each other. Because we are never truly *in*-dependent, never truly free from obligation to one another, never without need to serve and heal.

As we gather with our friends and families this weekend and give thanks for freedom, please also pray. Pray for our friends and families, remembering how dependent we are on them for love and support. Pray for our relationships, with GOD, with friends, family, and with strangers, that they may be filled with love and the desire for understanding. And pray for all those who depend on us: for food, for shelter, for safety. That we might be the answer to their prayers.