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2 Kings 5:1-15a

The Invisible Ones

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I would like to unpack for you the scripture lesson that you just heard because it is one of my favorite passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. It has everything you want in a good novel and is as current as international relations today. The main character is a famous Syrian general, Na'aman, who is the trusted counselor to the king of Syria. Na'aman is a proud and arrogant man used to having things done his way. Life is good; he is at the top of his game when suddenly he finds himself with a visible disease that may be leprosy. No one of his status or wealth gets such a plebian disease so he hides in embarrassment. Imagine the disarray in his household as he storms around in a temper, helpless for once in his life. Imagine his wife and staff tiptoeing through the house, not wanting to set him off.

A young girl, a Hebrew slave, can't take it anymore and mentions to the general's wife that a great prophet in Israel has the power to heal the general. The wife tells Na'aman who immediately tells the king whose response is to promptly write a letter to his enemy, the king of Israel asking him to heal the general who, by the way, had warred against Israel and had taken Hebrew slaves back to Syria, including the young girl in his household.

Now we are into international relations. The Syrian King gives Na'aman the letter and sends him to the court of the king of Israel. The king of Israel reads the letter that asks him, king to king, to heal the general. Believing that this is a set up, the king has a fit, tears his clothes and is ready to declare war on Syria when word comes to him from the prophet Elisha that he can handle the situation, saying, "Send him over to me. I'll take care of him." The King calms down and with finely honed political instinct, sees his opportunity to avoid responsibility for an international incident and sends the general to Elisha.

Now, as they say, the plot thickens. Complete with horses, chariots, gold and silver, Na'aman comes to visit Elisha. Expecting the ancient equivalent of a red carpet, Na'aman is shocked and humiliated when he is not greeted by the famous prophet but by a third class flunky who passes on a message from Elisha, telling him to go bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Na'aman has come expecting prayers and incense and bells and whistles. To be told simply to go bathe in the local river is an insult to the arrogant general. He tells his troops to pack up and head back to Syria where there are perfectly fine rivers to bathe in. He will not demean himself by bathing in the little creek the Hebrews call a river.

One of his level headed and braver staff members speaks up saying, "We're here. We've come a long way. The prophet has a good reputation. Why not just give it a try. Can't harm. Maybe will help." Gritting his teeth and ignoring his wounded ego, the great general disrobes and takes seven dips into the river. International peace is secure. He is healed. Now chastened, Na'aman goes back to find Elisha waiting for him. Professing faith in the God of Israel, Na'aman asks only that he be allowed to attend some ceremonial services in Syria. In his heart he will always worship the true God. In a remarkable interfaith moment, Elisha agrees, thus setting aside centuries of religious absolutism.

The point that can get lost in this story is that it is not only about the great and powerful movers and shakers: Na'aman; the king of Syria, The king of Israel, even Elisha. This is also the story of the anonymous, almost invisible people who individually provided the catalyst that resulted in that interfaith, international miracle.

It begins with a young Hebrew girl taken into slavery on one of the General's campaigns. Was she treated well? It must have been so that she would mention the powerful prophet to her mistress. Or perhaps, she needed to remind herself that her God still worked wonders through the prophets. She could speak that wonder to her master and in her heart find her freedom.

Na'aman's wife listened to her servant and took the young girl's words seriously. She wanted the best for her husband and passed on the information, encouraging Na'aman to make the journey to see the prophet. So, two women, essentially without any power but that of hope sent the general into the uncertainty of what the end of the journey might hold.

An anonymous young man went out from Elisha's house to greet the General and to tell him only that if he wanted to be healed, he would need to bathe in the Jordan River. That young man faced a general in full throated rage and held his own against that rage.

Yet another anonymous man, a staff person of the general, found the courage to calm the Na'aman into agreeing to bathe in the water. Through his practical words, the general was able to find the courage to let go of his arrogant pride and be healed.

The author of this story created a situation in which the arrogant general was afflicted with the most frightening of diseases and thus brought low. His own fear allowed him to be open to the words of women and his own need forced him to go begging to the alien king. His rage and powerlessness prevented him from responding a simple, every day instruction to bathe. It was only through reasoned intervention by an inferior that he allowed himself to be persuaded to follow the instruction. The movers and shakers were not kings or generals but simple minor nameless characters and a miracle occurred.

There are movers and shakers here among us but much of that moving and shaking is quiet and in the background. We may even be unaware of the moving and shaking that we do because it is done without conscious thought. but with faithfulness and empathy. We are all gifted with insights that come from our own experiences, our own knowledge or our own appreciation for what may be the best route to a solution. Because we are here in this worshipping community, we each have our own unique sense of faithfulness that helps us see the world with a perspective very different from one who has conformed to the prevailing 'me first' sense of how life should be lived; one who has no sense of the presence of the Divine in interrelationships and in relationship to all of creation.

If you are among the 3 persons in the whole universe who did not see Les Miserables, there is a character, a young boy who spies for a group of idealistic students who build barricades and wait for the masses to join them in seeking a more just society. The boy, a street urchin, sings a song called Little People. The first verse is worth hearing:

They laugh at me, these fellows, just because I am small.
They laugh at me because I'm not a hundred feet tall.
I tell 'em there's a lot to learn down here on the ground.
The world is big but lil' people turn it around.

In 1775, a small group of farmers and teachers and shop owners banded together to prevent British troops from raiding homes and arresting some important leaders of the

opposition; people like John Hancock, whose name we celebrate each July 4. That small group of men fought the first battles of the Revolution at Lexington and Concord and drove the British troops back to Boston.

30 years later, a small group of men and women gathered together to sign a Covenant of Membership, establishing the First Congregational Church of Burlington. You can see the names of that small, dedicated group each time you enter the Sanctuary. When you look at their names, you might consider that you and I are the embodiment of their dream. In some ways, we may be their miracle.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white man on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest began a bus boycott that involved virtually the entire African American community of Montgomery who walked or car-pooled or biked to work for 381 days. Those anonymous, mostly poor, people changed lives and laws. In their courage and patience those women and men taught the movers and shakers of our country that equality is both right and good.

Amazing what little people can do, is it not. Not all greatness is in the headlines or on the evening news. Greatness is what flows from the heart. Look at our church's recent history. After the terrible earthquake in Haiti, several of our folks got on planes and went down to help, providing medical care and support services. Following the devastating Tsunami, a group traveled to the James Hospital with enough money to help the hospital purchase needed medicine and the rice needed to feed the thousands of displaced people who camped in the yard of the hospital. What was given from the heart in small amounts became a miraculous source of assistance to the hospital and to the suffering community.

Close to home, every day, when people come to JUMP for assistance, we are providing the space, many of the volunteers and significant financial support through our food contributions, our financial donations and our willingness to open our hearts and our doors to those who have need.

Even closer to home, when someone needs a ride or a home cooked meal or a visit or a prayer, without fanfare, anonymous hands and hearts take the time to care. Greatness is a hidden way of life for many caring people among us.

Do you recall the statement of Margaret Mead: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.* It may not be the great world, but it is often the world of an individual or a small group that is changed by that commitment to care. Like those who changed Na'aman's world, may we quietly and joyfully change what we can, when we can and fade back into anonymity. That would be God's way. May it be ours. Amen