

Love Out of Bounds
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2 Kings 5:1-15

Luke 7:1-10

In my many forays into adult education in local churches of all kinds, to say nothing of teaching in theological colleges, I have come to see that people do not expect to be caught off guard by a Bible passage. Especially for students who have grown up in church, or who have become used to the cadences of Scripture, the idea that a particular story or text might be funny or surprising or even shocking seems out of bounds. In our so easily domesticated readings of the Bible, in which we just take for granted that the Bible is a serious and pious work, we can miss the surprises the text has in store for us. However, when a passage can be heard as an original ancient audience might have heard it, by re-creating the social world in which they might have understood the story, we can recover a sense of the shock value it might have had, and in that listen with new ears and perhaps surprise for the message the story might have for us today.

It's not too hard to see that our Old Testament text from Second Kings is a passage full of surprises for the characters within the story. But it probably contained surprises for a whole series of ancient audiences that might have heard the story as it wended its way through oral tradition to written story to re-written text and finally canon. The story seems simple and is not difficult to understand. The tale concerns the commander of the Aramean army, Naaman, a great man and able warrior who has led his country to victory over the kingdom of Israel. His greatness is hampered and shamed by the fact that he has leprosy. Hearing from a captive Israelite slave girl that there is a prophet in her home country who can cure him, Naaman secures his king's permission and generous funding to seek a cure in Israel, the country he has just conquered.

Confronting the dismayed Israelite king with a royal letter seeking a cure, Naaman instead is summoned to Elisha, the man of God in Samaria. Upon visiting Elisha's house, he is summarily told to go wash 7 times in the Jordan. This important and powerful man is taken aback and angered by the apparent lack of appropriately grand attention from the

prophet in effecting a cure. Only the caution of his own servants to think about his actions prompts him to actually carry out Elisha's instructions, whereupon he is immediately cured.

The origins of the story can be placed among the legends of the prophets Elijah and Elisha from the mid-ninth century BCE. Throughout the ninth century, Israel fought against its north-eastern neighbour, Aram with its capital in Damascus, in a series of skirmishes and battles in which each state took bits of territory and captive populations from the other. Aram was a constant threat and ongoing enemy. There was no love lost between these rivals, and plenty of suspicion and animosity.

Let's look at some of the surprises the story contains, not only for the characters in the story, but also for the probable audiences whom we might imagine to have heard the story. We can start with the king of Aram, who in the story listens to Naanam's tale from the servant girl and gives him leave and money to seek a cure in Israel. As a character, he is not portrayed as showing any surprise that his army commander might want to visit a prophet in a defeated opponent state instead of following the sacred rituals of his own religion. However, at least the upper class and militarily-minded folks in Israel who heard the story might have had a moment of surprise at this, followed quickly by self-satisfied chortling that they had "better" prophets than their conquerors.

What about the Israelite slave girl? My guess is that anyone hearing the story in the world of ancient Israel might have been a bit stunned by the portrayal that both the army commander and the king of Aram take seriously the word of a captive slave girl. In the story world, as well as in the "real world" of ancient Israel, the social position of a captive slave was basically that of non-entity, worth only the labour that could be gotten out of them before they were worked to death. That such a character is not only portrayed sympathetically but also given a voice in the story surely would have amazed some hearers of this tale. But this young woman retains allegiance to the prophet and thus the God of her origins, bravely reporting the power of the Israelite prophet to cure leprosy.

If we turn to the portrayal of the king of Israel, more conundrums await us. Given the war-filled situation between Israel and Aram, including Aram's defeat of Israel by the Lord's

power, the king's fearful suspicions of Naaman's request to cure leprosy seem justified. One aspect of the characterization of the Israelite king might present a bit of a question for the story's audience, however. The ongoing story in these chapters of First and Second Kings has included a whole series of prophetic legends in which the powers of Elijah and Elisha are quite clear, and very much aimed at evaluating and judging the behaviour and religious allegiance of the kings of Israel. These prophets have plagued the kings for years, calling the rulers to account and demonstrating their power as the Lord's messengers.

I can imagine that at least some among the story's audience might have been a bit flabbergasted that the king doesn't immediately think that Elisha might be able to help him out of the tight spot presented by Naaman's request. The connection with and provision of divine power is the prophet's calling card—why didn't the king think of it? It certainly reflects badly on the king's character. And *that* may be part of the story's larger connections to the whole history of ancient Israel—that kings, when they get too wound up in their own power and arrogance, forget that true power resides with God.

Elisha in some ways is the least surprising of all the characters, if only because the prophetic legends have portrayed these early prophets as unpredictable and ornery all the way through. So it does not come as a surprise that this man of God orders the king to send Naaman on to him, thus reminding the king about the main point anyway, a point the king should not have forgotten, that “there is a prophet in Israel.”

When Naaman makes his way to Elisha's house, an amazing scene results. This powerful foreign emissary is left cooling his heels in the dusty street while the prophet sends out a brief message. For those in the audience who have followed the prophetic tales, this comes as a bit of a surprise. Both Elijah and Elisha have been portrayed as very personal, hands-on kind of divine messengers. They both have been seen in the houses of the poor, taking on the needs and desperation of people, confronting kings directly, closely relating with people on all levels of society. This distant, impersonal approach is different and perhaps through our surprise, is revealing of another prophetic strategy. Maybe part of the point with someone like Naaman, who expects that everyone will be awed by his eminence, is to cut him down to size, as it were. Maybe Elisha deliberately reverses his more expected direct behaviour in order to undermine Naaman's arrogance.

The simple instructions Elisha sends out apparently do not play into Naaman's grandiose schemes for a dramatic cure, as his anger demonstrates. Perhaps both Naaman and the audience of the story need to get the point Elisha's simple instructions convey—no drama queens or kings need apply, God's power for healing is available to all who come to God.

A set of minor characters provides the next shock. Naaman's servants, perhaps military or diplomatic underlings, meet their master's anger head-on. Bravely and definitely surprisingly, they call him out, "Ugh, sir, you need to get off your high horse—just because the prophet's instructions are simple doesn't mean they aren't effective." Their persuasiveness is conveyed when Naaman goes to the Jordan with no further word of protest.

Naaman himself as a character has been a part of most of the unexpected story elements we've seen so far. But he carries a few all on his own. As biblical story telling goes, he is a fully drawn, emotionally real character. Thus, his arrogant assumptions that Elisha would give him personal attention and dramatic action come as no surprise. What is surprising, as we noted earlier, is that he actually listens to people who would have been insignificant in his circles of power and influence, his own underlings for one, and most astonishing, a captive slave girl.

Probably for most of the characters and definitely for the audience of the story, the most shocking elements come in the last verses. Naaman is healed of his leprosy, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." That simple declarative sentence that the narrator reports authoritatively but without fanfare would have astonished everyone in the story, except Elisha and the servant girl.

But it would have been world shattering for the audience of the story, through all the centuries that the story was handed down in the tradition of ancient Israel. That a foreigner was healed by God was unthinkable—not that God didn't have the power to do it, but that God wouldn't extend such healing power beyond the borders of Israel. It's one thing when God smashes your enemies on your behalf—that kind of divine power over foreign states works fine, thank you. But that God is willing to extend grace and healing to

the army commander, who just conquered your nation? That's an astounding desecration of a sacrosanct limit.

And to add insult to the injury just committed against the audience's pride and worldview, the story isn't done. Let's pick up the story line immediately after Naaman's healing: "Then Naaman returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." In this straightforward but dramatic declaration, Naaman's universe changes forever. He's the most surprised of all the characters because his whole universe has turned upside-down. He thought he was coming to be healed of leprosy but finds to his shock that he's gained a whole new understanding of the world. No longer does he know a cosmos ruled by the gods of Aram, but he recognizes the whole world is actually under the power of the Lord God of Israel. And that's the point at which the audience of the tale falls off their chairs or flees the auditorium in shock. Their neat and self-satisfied adherence to God as their God alone who enforces the boundaries of the chosen people has just been upstaged by their worst enemy.

Jesus' interactions with the Roman centurion in Luke 7 echo the same surprises that we found in the Naaman story. In this story, the outsider character is an officer in the Roman army, who sends messengers to Jesus asking him to heal his deathly ill servant. For the context of the story in Jesus' time and in the time the story was preserved in the early church, a Roman officer was a hated and feared person. The Romans were the oppressors of the Jewish people, and would likely have been always considered outsiders, beyond the boundaries of God's beloved people. However, the messengers whom the centurion sends are Jewish elders who testify that this particular Roman, "loves our people" and built the local synagogue. Jesus agrees to come to the centurion's house, but is stopped by yet more messengers from the centurion who report the centurion's words, that he understands authority and knows Jesus has the authority to heal by merely saying a word. Jesus is amazed and turns to the crowds to testify. "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." The centurion's servant is healed.

One important element in both these stories is that the recipients of God's power and grace do not have to change who they are to be welcomed into new life by God. The Aramean

commander Naaman, in fact is reported by the story to go back to his country and continues to serve his king, all the while still trusting that the God of Israel is the God of the whole cosmos. The Roman centurion does not and cannot stop being who he is—he still holds the power of Rome behind his words and actions. The identity and actions of these people does not change and yet they are recipients of God’s grace. They belong, they become insiders, part of God’s welcomed people when they recognize and express their trust in God’s goodness and grace. They don’t have to become something that they are not; rather the community has to become something it never imagined – a community whose boundaries are so flexible and open that even hated outsiders and enemies can become part of God’s people.

Taking these stories out of the realm of domesticated Bible stories requires first hearing the shock that the characters in the stories would have felt. This is so clear in the Luke story which reports that Jesus himself is amazed at the centurion’s faith. We also can recognize the world – shaking revelations of these stories for ancient and modern audiences.

Foreigners and despised outsiders are within God’s widest realm of care and well-being. Borders the ancient audiences thought were unalterable and sacrosanct are extravagantly violated by compassion, healing and inclusion. Moreover, foreigners and despised outsiders are capable of declaring their faithfulness in words that put those who claimed to be true believers to shame. Powerful and prophetic words are spoken by those who would never be considered capable of being true witness to God’s power and grace – in 2 Kings, these witnesses are both the least in the story—servants and even slaves, those whom normal social standards overlook if not deride and reject.—and the powerful enemy commander. In the Luke story, it is a despised enemy who amazes even Jesus with his faith. The audience of these stories gape in astonishment and consternation, “Who let all these weird people in here?” And even more pointedly, “why is God’s grace transcending boundaries that we thought we could count on?”

Surprises are the stock in trade for our God. Throw out all your expectations—the kingdom of God is among you. Hang on for dear life, this roller-coaster turns us and all our dearly held assumptions and habits on their heads, blasts holes in all our protective armour. No, no, it’s just the opposite, **let go** for dear life—welcome and show compassion to those you fear or scorn and to your worst enemies – God has been there before you and leads the way.

Listen to the voices of the weakest, those whom you step around in the street – they bear God's word. Let go of arrogance, pride, false security – welcome those whom God has already welcomed. Let go of fear -- there is nowhere you can fall where God cannot catch you. Let your world be broken open and changed forever—the word of God's love, the intentions of God for well-being regardless of boundaries—these surprise and astound us with the power of new life.