

Yesterday I met a friend at Cowan's Gap to kayak, and although the rain on the way home obscured the visibility a little bit, I still got to enjoy most of the views of the mid-state valleys from the high points on Route 30. And because of the holiday, I was appreciating maybe more than usual the mountain majesty. But I was also thinking about today's Old Testament reading and the irony that it usually comes up in the lectionary right around our Independence Day, because the heroes of this story are the people who do *not* live in freedom.

By this point in ancient biblical history, the surrounding nations were getting the better of Israel. So we read about an unnamed Israelite girl who is enslaved by the commander of a foreign army. Her owner, Naaman, is not a good guy. He proves this more and more by his attitude and behavior throughout the story, but even from the beginning we are meant to recognize that he is an enemy: he does not belong either politically or religiously to Israel; he commands the army of one of Israel's rivals; and he has enslaved an Israelite.

Naaman suffered from either leprosy or one of any number of ailments that were lumped together under that name. Nowadays we understand how germs work, but the writers of this story meant us to think of Naaman as cursed. People suffering from visible diseases were usually cast out of the community in the hopes of preventing the spread of their illness. Naaman evidently has enough clout that he gets to keep his powerful position, but this disease could have turned fatal. The Israelite slave girl has compassion on him, or maybe is afraid of getting infected while she's serving him, or maybe hopes to earn his favor or even her own freedom, but whatever her motivation, she suggests to her owner that if Naaman were to see the prophet in Samaria, he could be healed.

Naaman does what we might imagine would be typical for him: he relies on his wealth and status to call in a favor to his king, then takes a letter of introduction along with money and gifts to the king of Israel. The king of Israel wants nothing to do with him; he assumes that the king of Aram is using Naaman to start a war. But the prophet Elisha tells the king of Israel, *don't worry about it; send him to me so he can see that God is at work here*. Naaman, who apparently thought he needed a small army for a doctor's appointment, shows up at Elisha's house with his horses and chariots. Elisha, who maybe didn't want to come close enough to catch Naaman's leprosy, sends an admittedly bizarre message that he should wash seven times in the River Jordan and be healed.

Naaman throws a temper tantrum: *Doesn't he know who I am? Why didn't he come in person and wave his hand like magic and make the Lord God heal me? We have better rivers than this at home*. Naaman is livid that he didn't get the respect that he felt he deserved. It takes Naaman's servants, people who aren't used to special treatment, people who don't have the ear of the king or wealth or status, people who are used to doing what they're told because

they don't have a choice—it takes these people to talk him into doing this fairly simple thing—which works! Naaman doesn't have to do anything difficult or fancy. He doesn't need a miraculous display of power. He just needs to listen to the people who are trying to help him and do the simple thing he was asked to do.

I said that the heroes of this story are the servants, and to the extent that their persistent efforts pay off, they are. But let's not idealize their position; there is nothing inherently redemptive about suffering under oppression. The lesson here is not to be a dutiful servant even to those who exploit or abuse you. If we're looking for ourselves in this story, we're not going to find ourselves in the slave girl or the other servants. We're not the underdogs, the victims, or the Disney princesses. The person in this story who desperately needs transformation, who experiences redemption and salvation, who is changed, healed, and restored, is Naaman—the guy who was almost defeated not so much by disease but by his own ego. He had to listen to the people with no power, no status, no army behind them; his liberation would never have happened without them.

Naaman was offended by Elisha's simple instruction, but we are not that different. The only verse anyone ever remembers from Micah gives us our simple instruction: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?* Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God would keep us busy for a lifetime, but we try so hard to make faith more complicated—and not only for ourselves, which would be bad enough, but for others, which is even worse. Instead of inventing hoops to jump through, we're given the tasks of justice, kindness, and humility. The Lord requires us to pay attention to who is suffering injustice, to act with compassionate kindness, and to have the humility to listen and to learn from the least, the last, and the lowliest of voices.

I don't know if this reading was intentionally appointed close to our Independence Day. But I know that we tend to gloss over the unnamed slave girl's story as if she's merely a supporting character in a past too far removed to be relevant. Yet any honest reckoning of our collective history or even our present admits that the freedom we celebrate is tenuous, it has always been too jealously guarded instead of shared, and it remains theoretical for too many marginalized people. I know there is a movement in education to erase or ignore those uglier parts of our past, but surely as Christians who regularly confess our sins, we can admit that we didn't get it perfect from the get-go, that we are still bound up in harmful systems, that we remain a work in progress. The God who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt desires liberation for the whole human community. We are called to listen to the voices crying out to us for liberating work—work that frees not just others, but us, because God has made us one people, dependent on each other. May we answer that call.