

7th July 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 56 King of Glory, King of Peace
 728 O God, you search me and you know me
 564 O thou who camest from above
 682 God of grace and God of glory

Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-14
 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

“Big men, big rivers, little people”

Let us pray: may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we have heard a story from the days of Elisha about big men, big rivers, and little people.

And again, Jesus’ sending out the 70 labourers among the harvest – to heal, and preach. To be little people, reliant on the kindness and hospitality of strangers. As sheep among wolves, no care for our future.

Big men, big rivers, little people – it is important, because we read this scriptural record of escalating international tension and misunderstanding from 2 Kings at the end of a week that sorely needs to avoid international tension escalating, sorely needs healing. And we hear Jesus’ commission to his disciples in a week when only fools travel so unprotected as those first disciples.

This week began with heartbreak as the England team went out of the world cup, (I apologise to the English among us to have it be at the hands of the USA), and a week when big men who speak for big countries in our present day have postured and prevaricated. Over protests that have broken laws in Hong Kong, and the transport of oil in the Mediterranean, and refining of Uranium in Iran - and here at home we have had many big men and women arguing over what ‘democratic mandate’ means in this country.

I want you to think about Naaman’s story, and Elisha’s intervention for his healing and international peace-making between the King of Aram (Syria) and the King of Israel as a demonstration of public theology. A

model perhaps for how we might do public theology today, the prophets among us. And there are a few. Some sat right beside you.

Public theology happens when we intervene to shape the story of things in the public sphere, to interpret events of the day through the lens of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This lens expects sacrifice, and transformation, and being not just a peace-loving people, but a peace-making people. And not just to win an argument or shame an opponent, but to surprise someone with joy.

Or to bring a perspective that makes a tangled argument irrelevant. Public theology is not just words, but actions. Like when German Christians a few years ago, faced with news stories of migrants arriving in train stations and lavatories overflowing with rubbish such that the poorly paid cleaning assistants were overwhelmed, didn't get into an argument about government resource, but came and cleaned the loos.

This is surely the right week for a story of big men, big rivers. And little people. Because God seems always and again to place power where we least expect it, with the smallest folk in the story. The ones who might clean the state banquet hall and polish the silver, but do not go to the state dinner. Little people. And power for healing. Of bodies, and of nations. So no accident that when Jesus sends his disciples, he sends us as little people – intentionally dependent on others! But I'm ahead of the story.

Let's begin with the **big men**. One: Naaman – he is a successful general, he has everything – but this skin disease cripples his life – he is desperate enough to try anything, the most painful or demanding cures.

Two: Naaman's king – who wants to see him well, and also maybe sees a chance for power with the King of Israel, and so when they hear a rumour of a cure in Israel, sends Naaman with the full pomp and finery of the state – a parade of military might and wealth with him – and the letter asking the King of Israel for healing.

Third big man: The King of Israel – the one who panics, because what does he know about healing a skin disease? Is this a trap, an excuse to escalate tensions to provoke a war?

And then a different kind of big man - Elisha the prophet, who doesn't even bother to come out to see the first big man, Naaman.

We should be clear – Jesus had nothing against the big men of his day – though he found their ways sometimes perplexing as we may today.

And before any of us gets too self-righteous looking at the big men in this story, let's get real: most of us don't travel with a military parade, but when I travel, as most of us do, I carry letters that command my safe passage – in my case a US passport. And credit cards, and boarding passes - I expect these to open doors. I am a big man when I travel.

And yet, what do we know about all of these big men, excepting Elisha, in the story we heard? What we hear about is how desperately afraid they are. We hear their anxiety, their insecurity – am I being set up, will my power be enough, has someone else got more? And Naaman's fear, the most basic and personal - what happens when the clothes and money and power, when the very skin is stripped away?

There is in these big men, them and me, the longing for healing, the inarticulate yearning for wholeness, the suspicion that what we have in our passports and our credit cards and our boarding passes and in our armies - is only a shadow of real power.

And here is the thing, we each have in us both the big man and little person; we are a mix of graceful intention and complicated identity. Big men, Big women.

Next, **Big rivers**. Elisha says to Naaman, after he has made his display to the King of Israel and made his way down to the prophet's house, go wash in the river Jordan. And Naaman despite his desperation is incensed – if that was all that was required, are not the rivers of my own country bigger and better than this pitiful stream?

We get a front row seat to Naaman's nationalism. Even in his extreme distress – a national pride that nearly prevents his healing.

I also come from a land of big rivers – the Mississippi, and the Hudson – the Colorado River. And I love my country. And there are big rivers too in the several lands from which this congregation comes – the Thames here in London – the Bia in Ghana, the Rewa, widest river in Fiji on the island of Viti Levu, the Rokel River, also called the Seli, rising in the Guinea Highlands in north central Sierra Leone. And others.

For many of us, in considering nationality the legal parts and the paperwork eclipse thinking about where home is – what it feels like to

live as a foreigner in a strange land, among someone else's big rivers and big men. Home is an elusive thing.

Are not our rivers bigger? Better?

Friends, the point is that as for Naaman, we who glory in a righteous love of home may find that righteous love blinds us to the chance for healing.

Back to our story – big men, big rivers, and finally **little people** – healing comes again and again from the lowest, the least, the invisible – first from trafficked slave girl, servant to Naaman's wife – then from nameless servants, who reason with the commander Naaman – the ones who make things happen and whose names do not appear.

Little people – who are not little, in God's eyes. Not little, in terms of making life good – even, especially for the big men of big rivers.

All our national feeling, our affection and our fear is but a shadow. God will use our love of country, as God uses everything – and draw us through our lack of vision still towards healing.

Of course we should feel affection for our lands, our history – the countries where our heart is – of course we seek their well-being, rejoice with victories and weep with its tragedy, repent as we come to know its sin.

But neither the finery and power that Naaman brought with him, nor anything magical about the River Jordan cured him – his cure was a sign of God's grace. Gratuitous. Unearned.

Naaman still didn't get it – if you read on, you will see he wanted to take some earth away with him, as if this God of Elisha was only the God of that land Israel – and the sand would help God find him and hear his prayers when he went back to Aram. We carry home within us – and our call is to make home wherever we are, wherever we may be.

Here's the thing. In this world of **big men**, and **big rivers** – Jesus is still sending those whom we foolishly call (we now see) **little people**, sending them, sending us, out into strange places, where we will be sheep among wolves, but also friends among strangers. Jesus is sending us as his people – agents of healing – and he has involved us in this work not because we are especially good, or even because we

manage to believe a list of things, but because we are here, and he is the way he is. 'Speak a word of peace,' Jesus says to the 70 he sends. And do not boast about your exploits, but only about the one who sent you.

Wherever in this next week, wherever you find yourself, speak that word of peace.