

Anna Power

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II Kings 5:1-27

Read verses 1-4

That little girl is not given a name in the Bible. Now, a person without a name is no person at all – and so I have called her Anna. I hope one day to meet her in heaven. Then she can tell me her real name, among other things. Until then - I will call her Anna.

I have called this sermon Anna Power – and this is why: Because of her, and on the strength of her word, Naaman the mighty army commander, Naaman the powerful and rich, highly placed man who is in a position to get a letter of reference from the King of Syria... because of her this Naaman is willing to transcend cultural and religious barriers and open himself to wholeness.

THAT IS AMAZING! I'll try to spell out in just a minute just how amazing that is... but for now, my question is this:

How can we open ourselves today to the power ANNA POWER - that makes “terribly important” people willing to let go of themselves and their idols long enough to cross over to another person's world and in the crossing, encounter a truth and a wholeness he never dreamed possible?

Because of this little girl – a slave – a foreigner – a woman – a child – lowest of the low and totally without power... because of this girl a man's life is saved.

And on her word he is willing to let go of status and prestige (not right away of course) but let go enough to let in the possibility that his is not the only truth... that his ways are not ultimate that his power is not the only power.

What has to happen before someone is willing to do that? We need ANNA POWER – the spirit of God moving in such a way that even those of us who cling to what we think is power – are willing to let go just enough to encounter the Living God.

What we need is ANNA POWER – the Spirit of God moving us away from any claims to power except those of the Living God –

- we need it in our world
- we need it in our church
- and we need it in ourselves.

That we should receive such power ought to be our prayer. It will be our salvation. That we might be vehicles of this power for others would be our humble prayer toward faithfulness. To become like her – able to point others, and even our enemies and captors – toward the God who alone can bring wholeness - there could be no loftier aspiration. We couldn't hope to be better than that.

Let's walk through the story again.

Naaman is an important man. He is commander of the Syrian army – second in command only to the Syrian King. And Syria was a major world power. Naaman is an important man. He is used to leading. When he speaks, people listen. People fear and respect him. He has thousands of soldiers under him - he had been victorious in battle - they threw him a huge ticker-tape parade and he was the Time of Syria's Man of the Year 5 years in a row. A hero. Brave. Rich. Smart. Powerful. Naaman was an important man. More medals than he could wear at any one time, But he was a leper.

What you have to know is that.....Leprosy was dreaded - it made you unclean – an outcast –all kinds of moral failure associated with it....like AIDS in the early days.....and it was for “those people”. So... for Naaman of all people to have it - well! It changed some people's minds about leprosy.

Donations for leprosy research rose dramatically in Damascus, and it became fashionable for stars and public people to wear “beat leprosy” ribbons. Several telethons were staged and the Syrian Public Channels had documentaries on the disease and its consequences. Naaman had leprosy - and all his money and power, prestige and honours were useless to him.

What a personal crisis! Have you ever gone through something like that, or watched someone else do so? Come to the conclusion that the thing you thought gave your power are really, in the end, quite powerless? It's not an easy thing to deal with. It expresses itself in intense anger, sometimes depression, sometimes a frantic chasing after more and more of the very thing that has betrayed you.

We as a society in what once was called the first world are going through that very thing now. And in the church... certainly mainline ?????? denominations in North America and Europe are experiencing something very like it... a confrontation with the fact that the things we counted on to give us wealth and importance and influence and power and even meaning....are really in the end absolutely useless.

So Naaman the Great is a leper. At home, his wife (who apparently is also nameless) has a little girl as a maid. They got her in Israel when Naaman and his army had raided that country. They captured her and brought her back to work as a slave girl at Naaman's home, maid for his wife.

Yes, there's that.

Who knows what the atmosphere in that home has been like since Naaman had become ill – and who knows if this girl was used to speaking up to her mistress or not - but she suggests that there is a prophet in her home country who could help.

Naaman listened to her! That he did is witness either to his desperation or to the fact that she had in the past proved wise and helpful. For whatever reason, Naaman listens. He goes to the king. The king also reacts favourably. He doesn't want to lose this valuable member of his power base. He tells Naaman to go – treats it like a diplomatic opportunity, or something.....and gives him a letter of introduction, or of reference, to give to the king of Israel. Whose country he had recently demolished.

So Naaman leaves. Has he received yet the message that all his power and riches aren't going to get him anywhere? No. . Stuff like that is hard to give up. He sets off: **verses 5 and 6**

He's is not flying economy class, you know? And at the airport there's a limo and a red carpet and security guards and reporters... this trip to Israel is quite an event.

Let me just stop for a minute and point out that this is quite a come-down for Naaman: he's the commander of the army that has been clobbering Israel, which in his eyes is a tiny, two-bit no-consequence bit of land good for connecting trade routes. He is lowering himself to ask for help from this country, and on the strength of the advice of a little kid. It must have been a hard trip to make – but he takes a deep breath, puts on his uniform, all his medals, squares back his shoulders, swallows his pride and goes, making as much of a show to bolster his self-esteem as he can.

The King of Israel reacts fearfully and defensively – this had got to be some kind of trick – he's trying to pick a fight with me – he knows I can't heal anyone and now he'll use that for an excuse to invade us again.

Elisha the prophet (he took over from Elijah last week - remember?) Elisha says to the king “Calm down - it isn't a trick - send him to me.”

Naaman, clearly not thrilled by his reception so far, is sent away from the palace and to Elisha's house. Elisha is not living next door, either - and I'm guessing not in a house designed by Better Homes and gardens. Why couldn't he have come to the palace? No, Naaman had to go to him... But Naaman has come this far – he can suffer one more indignity. He gets together his horses and chariots and his whole entourage and makes the trip through town, to Elisha's house.

Elisha doesn't even bother to get up and go to meet him - doesn't ask him in or even talk with him. He sends a messenger to the door to say “go wash in the Jordan river”.

Naaman couldn't believe it - that was the last straw. As if the disease were not pain enough he had suffered indignity, insult and humiliation enough. This was too much. Doesn't the prophet know who I am???? I am Naaman the Syrian. Commander in chief of the army? Second in command to the king? And this little Israelite prophet who probably can't read and has no manners and doesn't wash too often and hasn't the decency to come to me.... now sends a message to wash in the Jordan River? Have you seen the Jordon River? A trickle – a brook – a muddy swampy knee-deep creek. We have rivers – big river – in Syria. If I wanted to go swimming I would have stayed home – who does he think he is?!!

And this is no ordinary illness – no! I am Naaman. When I'm sick I need specialists. I need brand new medicines and I need healers who do something. Wave your arms over me or something.

He stomped off in a huff.

When it was a little safer, some of his people said:

vs. 13

vs. 14

Isn't that wonderful? Don't you know a few Naamans? Maybe you're one yourself. That's OK. Isn't this true to life and human nature?

I have a couple of questions.

Anna, the little slave girl - remember her? (She tends to get lost as the story goes on, doesn't she?). Anna had been abducted from her family and enslaved in a foreign land. (THAT'S a whole sermon in itself.

She could have kept quiet and let him die. Instead she helped her captor. Why do you think she did it? Have you ever been in a position of having a chance to do a good thing for an enemy? Did you? Would you? Do you think Naaman returned the favour? What do you think happened, as far as Anna is concerned, when he got home?

The Bible tells story after story when the God of Israel healed, welcomed, used, supported people of other cultures and other religions. These narratives have layers not apparent on a first read through.

I have a question about the Annas of our own world right now. And we can laugh at Naaman, but he listened to that kid.

If you've not heard of Autumn Pelltier, a 13 year old Anishinaabe woman, google her address to the UN as a water advocate.

If and Greta Thunburg from Sweden:
I'll quote her just a bit. She's 16. She too addressed the UN on climate change

"I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. And act as if the house was on fire. Because it is."

"You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their eyes"

More locally, the young people who have been protesting and advocating for action on climate change here in Whitehorse.

12 year old Sofie Molgat: "You will die of old age. I will die of climate change"

12 year old Sylvie Sandiford: "I think they should definitely ban plastic bags and just do as much as they can to stop all this from happening"

And on it goes. And I am more than aware that this sermon, this whole service is being led by a senior citizen when it could have been led by youth. My only excuse for that ishave you ever tried to get ahold of kids in the summer?? But I want you to know that I am not unaware of that sad irony.

But my final question today is: how do we get Anna Power?

Could we become like Anna – ready to point people – even our enemies – to the source of life?

A lot of people are bemoaning the loss of the church's power in society. We aren't the force we once were, that's for sure. People for the most part don't pay attention when the church speaks out. Governments certainly don't care what we think or say. We've lost a great deal of power –

we don't have the big budgets anymore

we don't have the people power anymore

and we don't have the influence anymore.

The kindest thing to say about how people see us is ...as irrelevant. More often than that they see us as the source of the problems.

We're moving from being Naaman to being Anna.

We exist now in a situation where overwhelmingly the people around don't share our beliefs (or even know what they are, or worse still, assume what we believe from what they see on social media)

weak and without power... that's how God works. That's a Jesus model.

To know where real power lies, and to be able to point to it when people are ready to hear - to be able to speak in a way that frees people to be willing, as Naaman did, to swallow his pride and drop the pretense and step into the Jordan, admitting that there may be another way - to live and speak so that people are open to cross cultural and religious barriers in search of truth and wholeness. What is that but real power? Anna power. If the church could be Anna – we'd be faithful indeed. Amen.