

The Power of Empty Space
 By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory
 2 Kings 5:1-15
 11.4.18—All Saints Sunday

A household with two young boys, our bookshelves contain many truck stories. One of the many is called *Twenty Big Trucks in the Middle of the Street* by Mark Lee. In it, a boy of eight or nine describes a traffic jam caused by a broken-down ice cream truck while he rides his bike along the stopped vehicles. As he pedals down the street the boy waves to all of the drivers, and he names and counts the various trucks he sees. Delivery trucks, moving vans, food trucks and garbage trucks, trucks carrying cement and gasoline, a crane truck and a mail truck are all halted to a stop behind the broken-down ice cream truck. The boy on the bike passes them all, as adult community members gawk at the scene and wonder what to do. The boy is the only one who recognizes the solution: the powerful crane truck is the one they need! Being a kid, no one listens to him the first time, but he yells again, louder, "the crane truck is the one you need!" and he finally got people's attention.

The crane driver moves the crane so that it lifts the ice cream truck up, nice and slowly, and the trucks, one by one, are able to drive on. In the end, the ice cream truck is the only one left, and the boy enjoys a well-earned ice cream cone. It is a sweet story that teaches little kids how to count and about trucks, but it also teaches them a lesson that we learn in today's Scripture passage: Sometimes the person with the solution is last one you'd expect.

Army Commander Naaman was one who you expected to have solutions. Our passage begins by describing him as a "great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram" (2 Kings 5:1). Naaman was a mighty warrior who had solutions to the problems of battle but not the problems of his own body. Naaman suffered from leprosy, an awful skin disease that could cause deep pain and/or the loss of limbs. Very unsightly, people with leprosy were also ostracized from their community, their disease feared and misunderstood by their neighbors.

There was no cure; the disease ruined people's lives and then ended them. Naaman, the powerful war hero who helped his army become victorious, was helpless to save himself. Desperate to be healed, Naaman believes the unbelievable from one he'd least expect: A young foreign girl. This slave girl, captured when Aram (modern day Syria) fought Israel, serves Naaman's wife and proclaims to her: "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kings 5:3). There is no reason Naaman should listen to this person. She was a servant, after all! A young girl from the neighboring enemy state of Israel, a place where no Aramean would choose to visit.

In ancient times just like today, there are nations and groups that don't like each other. Perhaps no time in the United States' recent history was that more evident than the 1960s, when blacks and whites couldn't use the same water fountain, attend the same schools or even use the same bathrooms. The acclaimed movie *Hidden Figures*, adapted from Margot Lee Shetterly's book *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*, tells the story of Katherine Johnson, one of NASA's human "computers." This extraordinary mathematician

worked side by side white engineers all day, yet, as the movie depicts, was ridiculed and set apart because she was black. Whether it was running half a mile to the colored bathroom or making her own coffee, Katherine was repeatedly reminded of her lower place in society and in her office, regardless of her intellect and ability to crunch the numbers. This is, until those numbers had the power to determine whether or not John Glenn would orbit the earth; then people listened. When everything is on the line, people listen. When John Glenn says to “go get the girl” to check the numbers before his historic flight begins, people listen. The powerless person becomes the powerful. The white men listen to Katherine, a black woman.

Military hero Naaman listens to a slave girl from Israel. The powerless becomes the powerful. He listens because he is desperate; he listens because he wants to be healed, and he listens because the girl’s suggestion is so crazy that maybe, just maybe, it is actually true. He listens because she is so confident of this lord, a lord that Naaman doesn’t know, but who sounds quite powerful. Naaman listens because he can’t not listen; he can’t not hear about a possibility of being cured of the disease that has robbed him of so much of his life.

The king of Aram listens to Naaman, too, wanting his commander to be made well. And so, Naaman goes to Israel to find this slave girl’s lord and be healed. He first arrives at the center of Israel’s power, the king’s palace. Naaman has in hand a letter from his king requesting that the Israel lord make him well. But the king can’t fill the request. Exasperated and scared he proclaims: “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends me word to cure a man of his leprosy?” Fearful, the king assumes that Aram is picking a fight with Israel. The king of Israel never considers the request to be genuine, never thinks of the Lord’s prophet, Elisha who, by this time, is known in Israel as a powerful healer who can help. The king has faith only in his human powers — powers that have amassed for him a nation state, powers that are extraordinary, yet powers that are useless to such a request.

The king of Israel is so gravely disturbed by this letter that he tears his clothes, an action traditionally done in time of mourning. The king could not see Naaman’s visit as an opportunity for divine healing; he saw it only as a trap set by the Aramean king — a trap that reveals the king’s failure and an excuse for an Aramean raid on Israel. So many times, Katherine Johnson checked the numbers and figured out a part of the problem, keeping the team from the necessary calculations to get the spaceship up, but her fellow workers couldn’t hear her, or they didn’t want to. One excuse they gave was that she, an African-American woman, was a Russian spy. They saw a trap instead of potential.

Lucky for Naaman, the prophet Elisha does not see in his request a trap, but potential for healing. When Elisha sees his king in mourning clothes and learns of Naaman, he tells the king to send the Aramean to see him. Naaman goes. Now he is away from the center of Israel’s power, down by the Jordan River. Naaman anxiously waits for the prophet to come out and heal him, but that doesn’t happen. Naaman only sees Elisha’s messenger, who tells him to wash seven times down in the Jordan River.

Initially, Naaman wants no part of this washing. He is insulted by Elisha not speaking to him directly and by the thought that he could be healed in a river in Israel rather than his own nation. Like this king of Israel, Naaman cannot see what God is doing. Like the King of Israel, Naaman is used to being able to use his own powers and knows only of powers like his; he cannot perceive of anything different. The slave girl suggested something different; Elisha suggested something different; God is doing something different and using the faithful people to get it done. Not the “power” people who have it all but, rather, the people who have very little. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “God comes to people who have nothing, but [an empty] room for God—and this hollow space, this emptiness in people, is called, in Christian speech, faith.”

When she wasn’t at Langley crunching numbers, Katherine could often be found at Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church in Newport News, Virginia. Despite working full time and raising three girls, Katherine dedicated much time to her church. She served as a church officer, the chair of the finance committee, which was an ideal fit for the mathematician. She sang in the choir and served as an elder commissioner to the 187th General Assembly. When asked about her, former pastor at Carver Memorial, Rev. Brian Blount, reflected on Katherine’s humility, saying that he’d been pastoring the church for three years before he learned about her work with NASA. Such humility suggests that Katherine’s identity as a NASA mathematician was second to her identity as a Christian, a beloved woman of God.

The slave girl, Elisha and Katherine, too, had little in the way of personal or societal power. Their actions were not recognized by others as influential; their identities were not defined by their power. Rather, the identities of the slave girl, Elisha and Katherine were defined by whose they were, as much as who they had become. This definition left space in their hearts and minds for their Creator to reside, a seemingly empty space, a space for faith in God, the giver of true power. “God comes to people who have nothing but [an empty] room for God—and this hollow space, this emptiness in people is faith” (Bonhoeffer).

It is this faith that is given to Naaman, a foreigner who is healed by the God of Israel, not because of his powerful position as army commander, not because he brought over 800 pounds of presents in gold and silver (though it was customary to bring gifts to healers), not because he was Aramean, but because God is God, and no one is out of God’s healing reach. God is the God of Israel not to exclude others but to be a witness to God, to let everyone know that God is out there for anyone with eyes to see and ears to listen!

We hear this over and over again in scripture to see with our eyes and hear with our ears, and we are told repeatedly that it is difficult to do. In the “Parable of the Sower,” Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah: *“You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. 15 For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their hearts and turn — and I would heal them”* (Matthew 13: 14-15).

How much of this lack of understanding is a consequence of looking for power in the wrong places, like Naaman? How much of this lack of understanding comes from us not

keeping an empty space for God in our lives, for not recognizing this empty space as the center of power? How many of us can speak of our Lord's healing with the confidence of the slave girl?

I know that for me, many of my answers to these questions are not the "right" ones, especially as one of your pastors! I often listen to the easy voices to hear, the ones with power. I squeeze God into my life by trying to keep up and *do* all the things on my endless lists. I forget that God wants me to *be*. I don't give credit to God for all the ways She moves in my life, because I don't often pay attention. I am distracted by the constant news and events of the day, which lead me to fear.

It is so easy to get swept up in the fears of the day, especially when there are so many — gun violence, government corruption, economic recession, climate change, technological warfare, just to name a few. There always has been and always will be a lot to fear and this is all the more reason for us to choose faith, to choose to trust in the power of the empty space that is God, to choose in the power and grace of God, to remember whose we are and that our identities are rooted in our baptisms, during which we claimed the name of Christian. We are children of God, a gift of God's grace, not a result of anything we have done. This same grace is given to us again this morning as we partake of Jesus' meal of nourishment, renewal and love. This is a reminder that to claim this power — to hold this empty space — we need bring nothing to the table but ourselves, and our willing hearts.

In the end, that is what Naaman does; he takes himself into the Jordan River and washes seven times, an act that requires virtually nothing from him, even though he could give so much. Naaman allows God to cleanse him, and he is healed. This morning, let us be filled by God, stretching our empty space, nurturing our faith that we might go back out into the world with a bit more power. Power that does not rest in ourselves, but in our God working through us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.