

Sermon for Proper 9, Year C "Finding your Power"
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Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham
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Do you feel powerful or powerless? Who here can bench press 200 pounds? 100? 50? Who has an adequate amount of money? Who is in good health? Who has a job with responsibility? Who here knows how to bake bread or fix cars or bandage up wounds or play an instrument or plant a garden or use the Internet or fix computers? Who can influence the President? Congress? The State House? The board of selectmen?

But can you stop the cancer that is attacking a friend or family member? Can you clean up the oil spill? Stop global warming? Keep the area from being flooded, as it was in March? Provide jobs for the unemployed? Guarantee that you'll be able to pay for housing and food next month or next year?

Do you feel powerful or powerless? Sometimes we feel powerful where we really are weak or powerless when we really have power.

The lesson from 2 Kings is all about power and powerlessness. It's a compact story that packs a punch. Here's the set-up: Naaman is the commander of the army for the king of Aram, a country to the northeast of Israel, where Syria would be today. Naaman is a powerful man. Not only does he command a great army, but he is described as a mighty warrior, and someone highly valued by his king. We also find out that he is rich. He has it all—wealth, social standing, influential job, the approval of the king, and moral fiber. Except that he has leprosy, a devastating disease. The disease was greatly feared, and could cause nerve damage that would prevent Naaman from serving as commander. Moreover, leprosy was thought to be highly contagious—lepers would be cut off, outcast, from society, a humiliating, painful future that Naaman and his king dreaded. Neither Naaman nor his master knew what to do.

Now the scene changes. We're in the home of Naaman, a house that was large and richly furnished. There is his wife, and also a servant girl. Most likely the wife of Naaman has been talking to someone else, or even several different people. She is so upset at her husband's health. Their good fortune and social prominence is in jeopardy, and she is worried at what will become of her husband as the disease takes hold. The servant girl overhears all this, especially as the mistress confesses to her friends that she doesn't know what to do. The servant girl is the picture of powerlessness. She is young, female, and foreign. She was captured in Israel when the Aramaeans raided her hometown and brought as a slave back to Aram. She doesn't even have a name in this story. But she ventures to bring hope to her mistress and master: "If only my master could meet the prophet who lives in Samaria (the capital of Israel), he would cure him of the leprosy." The Israelite girl knows about Elisha, who has done deeds of wonder through the God of Israel. She, the powerless one, knows where true power lies, and she is the one who is able to help the powerful Naaman.

Surprisingly, Naaman takes her suggestion, and gets permission from the king to visit Israel. The king writes a letter to the king of Israel, asking him to cure Naaman of his disease. Naaman goes, and takes a few small gifts with him—10 talents of silver, approximately \$7½ million today and 6,000 shekels of gold, worth a cool \$3 million today, and oh, 10 dress-up suits. The king of Israel is a very powerful man, with soldiers and chariots, a royal palace, farms, servants, and now, an extra 10 million dollars, but he is frightened by the request. He is afraid that the king of Aram is setting him up, so that when he

fails to cure Naaman, Aram will have an excuse to wage war on Israel. The king of Israel, who is nameless, is not a believing man. He doesn't trust in God nor honor Elisha the prophet, so he reacts as a powerless person, in fear and alarm, publicly tearing his clothes in mourning.

Meanwhile, the tale has come to the ears of the prophet Elisha, so he sends word to the king: "Why are you tearing your hair out? Why are you in mourning? Let the man come to me, and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." The subtext here is also a jab at the king of Israel—"and you will also know that there is a prophet in Israel," because of course if the king had really believed in God, he would have immediately thought to send Naaman to Elisha.

And so Naaman is redirected to Elisha's house, and the powerful man continues in grand style with his horses and chariots to the prophet. Before Naaman can even get to the door, a messenger comes to him from Elisha with the directions that he should continue to the Jordan River and wash in it seven times. Naaman, despite his leprosy, is still a man used to respect and control. He is absolutely incensed at Elisha's behavior. The prophet didn't welcome him in grand style, he didn't show how impressed he was by Naaman, he didn't put on an impressive show of waving his hands or calling on God in prayers. Worse, he directed the commander to wash in a dirty little stream in Israel, while they had much more grand and impressive rivers in Aram. So he turns away in a rage, about to give up and go back home—the powerful man refusing to be treated as a commoner.

But it is again powerless people who save the day. Naaman's servants, who really understand the situation, convince Naaman to get over himself and submit to the prophet's instructions. "If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. So why aren't you going to do something that is easy?" Of course, the answer is pride. He listens to their counsel, swallows his pride, and goes down to the river. He washes seven times as instructed, and he comes out cured.

Now that is not the end of the story. After Naaman is healed, he goes back to Elisha. You see, he is not only healed in body, but in spirit. He finally understands. For all his outward might, it is only when he humbled himself, listening to servants and slaves, asking for help from a foreign prophet, obeying instructions in faith instead of issuing orders in confidence, that he was healed. But when he did that, he encountered the incredible power of God. The God of Israel, who works through weakness, who is channeled through those who trust not in their own abilities but in God's. Naaman is so grateful and so taken by this God of Israel, that he wants to reward Elisha. The prophet refuses. Finally, Naaman says, well, then, I'm taking home two loads of Israelite soil, so that he could worship the God of Israel at his home. (It was believed that Gods were local, tied to the land.) Naaman also says, I'm going to have to make a show of worshipping the local god Rimmon, but I will really worship the God of Israel, because he is the one true God.

Is that not a wonderful story? When faced with difficult situations, those who knew God—the servant girl and Elisha—react with calm assurance, because they know where true power lies. Even the servant girl, who herself has little or no power, assures Naaman that Elisha can heal him. Those who don't know God, such as the king of Israel, react with fear and anxiety, even though he has great worldly power. Naaman is a complicated figure, because he takes the servant girl's suggestion, exhibiting faith, but then throwing a temper-tantrum when his station and authority aren't honored. Finally, walking the humble way, he comes to know God and be God's #1 fan, putting to shame even the king of Israel.

Faith is not only about knowledge it is about a choice, putting that knowledge and belief into action. The servant girl knew of Elisha and believed in the power of YHWH, the God of Israel. But she had a

choice. She could have said—I hate all Aramaeans; they stole me from my home and forced me into slavery; may Naaman rot in hell with his leprosy! But she didn't. She chose to tell his wife and was used by God to convert Naaman. The king of Israel had a choice—he could have gone with Naaman to Elisha to see if God would really heal Naaman. But he couldn't be bothered, and was not converted. Elisha was given the opportunity to heal a foreigner, an enemy of Israel. Would he? He chooses to do it. Probably he felt the call of God in this opportunity; as well, he might have seen that God was extending his name and power to another country and reducing the risk of war with Aram while he was at it. You think Naaman is going to wage war with them now? Nope. And Naaman was invited to be healed by leaving aside all his own power and relying on the God of Israel, and at first he reacts badly. But with the urging of his servants, he finally chooses life and faith over his own power, and is cleaned of leprosy, pride, and worshipping the wrong god.

Our power comes from God. We both need to truly believe that God is powerful and brings power where we have none, and also choose to act on this belief.

Do you feel powerful or powerless? So often we confuse the two. We feel powerless where we actually have power. We may look to jobs, status, investments, houses, political connections, or even doing lots and helping others to make us feel worthy, worthwhile, and secure. And yet feel completely helpless when struck by illness, addiction, job loss—never mind oil spills, climate change, family feuds, or bad TV shows.

And many people feel powerless where we actually have power. People feel poor who really aren't poor at all. Here is a reality check: If you make \$50,000 per year, which is the median household income for Massachusetts, compared to the rest of the world, you are in the top 1%. 99% of the world's population makes less money than you. Most of us can read and write—again, incredible power. Do we have three meals a day, a roof over our heads? Amazing! Does your body work? Miraculous! Do we have a friend or family member who loves us? What a gift! Do you have some particular ability? Phenomenal! Did you enjoy this weekend's perfect weather?

Now hold on—here's the clincher: Do you know JHWH, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ? Do you know how this God works, to bring healing and life out of sickness and death, and particularly works through those who are considered nobodies or outsiders or people without power? Because if you do, you have access to the greatest power of all. Do you choose to say yes to this God, when she gives you an opportunity to point to the real power in the world? To do something for life?

We feel powerless, overwhelmed by all the bad things that happen around us. But we are not like those without hope, says the Apostle Paul. We are not powerless. We can sit around watching news reports on the Gulf crisis and wringing our hands, feeling that we can't do anything. Or we can pray. And go to a prayer vigil. And write our congresspeople. And organize a local vigil. And give money. Or go see about getting involved in clean up. We can feel horrible that we have lost our jobs or are running out of money and sit around worrying ourselves into a stew. Or we can pray to the God who loves us for direction. We can use our time to do something positive. We can advocate for green jobs and try to address unemployment in our community, asking for God's help and guidance. Each of us cannot do it all, but every one of us can do something. Something we feel passionate about—animals or organic farming or children or cancer or the homeless or whatever. The worst thing about these times is that we feel so powerless. The best thing about these times is that we after we feel powerless, we can look for the real power and hitch our life to it—the life of power through God.

Let us pray. Amen.