

# DISCERNING GOD'S VOICE AMONG THE MARGINALIZED

Wati Longchar

## God Works Always

God works in mysterious ways. Sometimes God reveals Godself through marginalized people; sometimes through friends, neighbours, or beggars in the street; sometimes through an insignificant insect, bird, or animal; sometimes through pain and suffering; sometimes even through a virus like the Covid-19; and sometimes through blessings, success in our lives. We should be always prepared to encounter God among strangers in an unexpected and unknown location too. A friend of mine shared a story of a soldier through Whatsapp message:

*During an intense war in the battle field, a young soldier was separated from his comrades while retreating. In defeat, the young soldier ran as fast as he could while the enemy troops gave chase. Alone and exhausted, the soldier knew the enemy was close behind. He spotted an old abandoned house and ran towards it. Quickly, he crawled into one of the dark rooms and hid. Feeling safe for a moment, he knew once the enemy troops find the house, he would be captured and killed. Awaiting his doomed fate, he prayed to God, "Lord, please protect me." "My life is in your hands, may your will be done." "I love and trust you." After his prayer, a spider began to weave a web at the entrance of the room. The spider layered delicate threads one by one across the room's doorway. The young soldier thought, "I asked God for protection from guns and bullets yet He sent a little spider to save me?" Enemy troops discovered the old house and began searching each room one after another. The young soldier could hear his enemies' footsteps moving closer towards his hideout. As the enemy troops reached the entrance of the room, they stopped and said, "Nobody can be in that room." "They would have had to break the spider's web to enter." Let's keep moving". The enemy troops then backed away and searched elsewhere. In amazement, the young soldier fell on his knees and prayed, "Lord, please forgive me for I lack faith. Where there is God, nothing is impossible!"*

God protects and sustains people in the most surprising ways. Here God used one of the insignificant creatures, the spider, to reveal God's power of love. In both the Old and New Testaments, there are many testimonies of how excluded and marginalized people were used as God's instruments for the transformation of society.

## God's Healing Message from Slaves

In 2 Kings 5:1-19, we have the story of the healing of Naaman, a great commander of the army.

*<sup>1</sup>Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.<sup>[a]</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

<sup>4</sup> Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. <sup>5</sup> "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents<sup>[b]</sup> of silver, six thousand shekels<sup>[c]</sup> of gold and ten sets of clothing. <sup>6</sup> The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

<sup>7</sup> As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

<sup>8</sup> When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." <sup>9</sup> So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup> Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

<sup>11</sup> But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. <sup>12</sup> Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

<sup>13</sup> Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" <sup>14</sup> So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.(NIV)

Two servants/slaves became agents of healing. A disease, just as the Covid-19, does not make any distinction between the rich and poor. Naaman suffered from leprosy, though he was a very successful army commander of the king of Syria. His skilful and dedicated work had won favour from the king and people. And yet the nameless little slave girl – a prisoner and victim of war, displaced from her family, people, and land, and forced to work as a slave for Naaman's wife – became an agent of healing. We see the following contrasting positions of the two – Naaman and the Nameless little girl:

Naaman is powerful	– the Nameless girl is powerless and helpless.
Naaman is a ruler	– the Nameless girl is ruled.
Naaman is a conqueror	– the Nameless girl is conquered, abused & misused.
Naaman is an army commander	– the Nameless girl is a victim of the army.
Naaman is a slave owner	– the Nameless girl is a slave.
Naaman is a predator	– the Nameless girl is a victim.

Naaman needed healing  
Naaman has a name

– the *Nameless girl* offered help/healing.  
– the *girl* does not have a name, which means nobody.  
(Naveen Rao)

In her pitiable and pathetic experience of war and dislocation, the Nameless girl knew what Naaman was going through in his life. She knew the pain, sorrow, anxiety, isolation, and depression of Naaman. Instead of rejoicing over his misfortune and pain, the Nameless girl offered words of healing. *“If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”*

We often think that the poor have to listen to the ruler and literate and not the opposite. It was not the custom for the poor, particularly slaves, to offer suggestions to their master. It was an insult for the master to listen and obey the slaves. It was indeed difficult for the high-ranking army officer like Naaman to listen to the words of the slave girl. What a shame to listen to a slave! The commander, therefore, wanted to get healed by maintaining the royal power, protocol, and offering huge wealth.

First, he obtained an official letter from the king of Aram thinking that the royal authority and power would be respected and obeyed by the subjects. We do the same even today. Letter and seal from the high office represent power and authority.

Second, he took ten talents of silver (330 kgs), six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing in horses and chariots to impress and appease the prophet Elisha. We do the same even today to bribe persons in the high position and authority to do our favour.

As was a common protocol at that time, Naaman expected that the prophet would come out, bow down before him, accept the gifts and perform rituals like calling on the name of God, wave his hand over his body and cure his leprosy miraculously. The Commander thought that he would thus be healed in such a manner. The rich and rulers also expect the poor to worship them. But it happened in quite a different way.

Instead of going and bowing down before Naaman, the prophet Elisha sent a message through a messenger, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and you shall be clean” (v.9). Elisha followed no protocol and did not care for the King’s letter and gifts. Naaman felt insulted and took this as disrespectful not only to him but also to the king. He became angry and decided to

go away without obeying what the prophet Elisha asked him to do. But then another word of healing came from his servant, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’” (v. 13). Only when he listened to the voice of his servant, did Naaman finally get healed. God’s voice can be heard only when we journey with the people who are on the margins because that is where God is present. God is with them. The real future of humanity comes from the margins, but not from the decisions and deliberations of the people who dominate the world.

### **God’s Healing Work from Strangers**

In the New Testament, we have the story of the Good Samaritan, the most favourite story for Christians. Here the two unexpected persons became the agents of God for giving life to a helpless person.

*<sup>30</sup> In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ Luke 10:30-35*

A man was in near-death condition on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The ruler, holy, religious people who are expected to help the needy chose not to help. They chose to ignore and left him to die. The Samaritan, the most hated and the most despised person during the time of Jesus, chose to save his life. An unexpected person in a dangerous location, he risked his life for the sake of the wounded person. And so did the inn-keeper. Both nursed the man back to health. They did not ask any questions of race, gender, and money. They opened their hands, hearts, and home to nurture the near-death person back to life. The Jewish looked upon the Samaritans as selfish, arrogant, and unkind people. But they stood for saving the life of the stranger. The acts of the Samaritan and inn-keeper are God’s acts of love. The acts of the Pharisees and Levites are a demonic act of unkind and denial.

### **God’s Action of Love and Care from an Excluded Person**

We can discern God’s voice and action among the excluded and marginalized people even today in our society. A few years ago, a young LGBTQI+ shared his testimony like this:

*My name is Sani (name changed) and I was born in a Christian family. As I grew older, I felt different in my behavioural pattern. I became more attracted to men, admired heroes, and always wanted to get married to a hero. I started hating my body when I saw hairs in my face and body. Seeing my behaviour, my parents thought that I am possessed by the devil and took me to a Revival camp. My parents even took me to a psychiatrist. I and my parents prayed to God but my feeling remained the same. My parents were worried and thought that I am a burden and shame to the family and openly said that I am possessed by an evil spirit. Many people tried to avoid me. I felt very depressed and struggled alone. Since I did not change my behaviour, my parents, brothers, and sisters started torturing and abusing me.*

*Sometimes I was beaten and was threatened that I will be sent to jail. I also experienced discrimination in school. My fellow students teased me always. It became unbearable and thus I decided to leave both school and home without knowing what future lies ahead of me. I wandered here and there begging for food, sometimes slept in the street, bus and railway stations. After a few days of wandering hopelessly, I met a transgender friend. I explained my problem to her. She was kind enough to give me shelter and food at her place and she asked me to work in her beauty parlors. It was a great relief for me. However, I discovered that the workplace was also not safe either. The police personnel verbally abused and tried to sexually molest us from time to time; sometimes they would ask irritating and irrelevant questions. Though we had to face such a cruel act almost every day, we had no choice since that was the only means of living. When we complained to local authorities, their answer was “you are a man and why you are wearing female attire. Change your lifestyle and after that nobody will harass you.” Realizing that God is the only answer for my life, I went to a Revival Camp again. I prayed and fasted for days. The counsellor asked me to repent and, as a sign of repentance, I was asked to return to my parent’s home, cut my hair like men, and wear men’s clothing. I did as advised and gave testimony to many churches how God changed my life. But my feeling remained the same though I prayed every day. I always wanted to undergo sex re-assignment and settle with a man and work in the church.*

Many people have contributed to making Sani life’s journey miserable. Nobody could understand her problem except the excluded one – the transgender – who could feel the pain and suffering of Sani.

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| <i>Parents</i>              | : no clue what Sani was going through. They thought that he was possessed by a demon. They sought both religious and medical intervention. |
| <i>Brothers and sisters</i> | : tortured, abused, beat, and threatened to send him to jail.  |
| <i>Fellow students</i>      | : teased him and made him an object of fun in school.  |
| <i>Police</i>               | : abused and sexually molested him.  |
| <i>Local authority</i>      | : scolded for behaving and wearing women’s attire.   |
| <i>Counsellor</i>           | : Considered as an act of sin. Repentance is the solution adding the feeling of guilt.   |
| <i>Transgender</i>          | : Gave her shelter, food, and job. She acted like the Good Samaritan.  |

I am certain that if Jesus was here today, he would appreciate the good act of the transgender. We have seen how God used a spider, a slave girl, a servant, a Samaritan, an innkeeper, and a transgender as instruments for the healing, protection, and transformation of life.

### **Marginalized Voices – Basis of Future Society**

The rich people who are protected by an unjust power structure cannot understand the pain and suffering of the people. People who cannot understand the suffering of the people cannot bring solutions to the people in pain. Marginalized people, women, persons with disabilities, and other excluded groups who have been marginalized for centuries have concrete answers to solutions because they bring first-hand knowledge of the suffering imposed by exclusionary practices. The reality of structural injustices can be understood only from the experience of the oppressed. One must judge the social dynamics from the perspective of people in the margin, but not from the centre of power. Charles Kammer said that “All our policies, all our social structures must be first judged by their effects on the poor, the powerless, and minorities.” James Cone, a Black theologian, said that “the victim of the power alone can suggest how the world ought to be.” Being oppressed, they know what is wrong because they are both the victims of evil and recipients of God’s liberating activity, the Gospel of Christ. Similarly, J.B. Metz said that the inherited structures have to be analyzed from the perspective of the oppressed. “We have to judge ourselves and our history with the eyes of the victims.” It is the marginalized groups suffering that provide us with criteria to judge the inherited social structures and eventually struggle for the humanization of the social reality. Change can take place only when we do like the marginalized ones who brought a wounded person from near-death to life. The voices of the marginalized people need to be heard and their vision of life should form the basis of our future. They powerfully testify that the world needs change. God has chosen the marginalized and excluded people, not for the reason they are weak, but because they are created in God’s image and that they have the right to celebrate the fullness of life offered by God to all. The marginalized and the poor thus should not be seen as those in need of help and support. They have resisted injustice and oppression and they continue to offer alternative solutions for peace and justice. They challenge us to work towards new patterns of inclusiveness, sharing, and transformative actions. We are challenged to build up persons and communities in ways that help them to experience God’s gift of life.