

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year C

June 6, 2010

1 Kings 17:8-24

Psalm 30

Luke 7:11-17

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Two widows. Two only sons. Both dead. Two broken hearts. Two prophets, moved to compassion.

Elijah lives in the Northern Kingdom of Israel some 850 years before Christ. He is called by God to oppose King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel, who is turning the country against the Lord and slaughtering those who follow the Lord. As punishment for this apostasy, Elijah calls for a drought that affects the whole land, a drought that lasts some three years. The Lord sends Elijah to Zerephath, where a poor widow is gathering firewood to make her last meal for her only son and herself before her pantry is empty. They will eat and then they will die. Elijah asks her to feed him first. The widow astonishes us by obeying the word of the prophet, feeding him first, and he rewards her faithfulness by promising that her pantry will never be empty until the rains come, the rains that will restore the food supplies for everyone.

In her gratitude, the widow takes Elijah in and provides for him. Calamity strikes as her son—her only son—dies. She laments to Elijah, “What do you have against me? Why have you visited my sin upon me? Why have you taken my son from me?”

Here we see the human condition: we are subject to death and an even worse fate, the death of a loved one, most particularly the death of a child. Not just any child, in this case, but the *only* child, the one who would become the provider for his widowed mother. Her response is universal: What have I done that this has happened to me? How is it that my sin has come upon me to cause the death of my child?

Elijah takes the dead boy from her mother, carries him to his room, and cries out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” Elijah continues his lament, and three times he cries, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.”

How often have we cried the same prayer, for our own or for the loved one of another?

The Lord listens to the voice of Elijah. God hears his cry. And God responds by restoring the boy, and Elijah gives him back to his mother. The severed relationship has been restored. The widow has hope for the future. She exclaims to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

Some 850 years later, another prophet, named Jesus, comes along. Another widow. Another dead son, her *only* son. Another broken heart. They are carrying the dead body on the bier, the stretcher upon which the body is laid, outside the gates of the city, for death defiles, and the defilement must be buried outside the city. Jesus sees the mother weeping and has compassion for her and announces, “Do not weep.” Do not weep? What else is there to do? I weep for my son, and I also weep for myself, as I have no future without my son.

How many futures have been cut off by the death of loved ones? It does not have to be the death of our children, on whom our livelihoods depend. The futures of relationships are cut off with the death of loved ones, regardless of age.

“Do not weep.” Jesus comes forward and touches the bier where the dead man is lying. Jesus defiles himself with death. Those carrying the bier stop in their astonishment. Who is this, who defies defilement? Who is this who stops the slow, steady march of a funeral procession? Jesus speaks, “Young man, I say to you, rise!”

The dead man sat up and began to speak. It is one thing to breath; it is quite another to make intelligible speech. The dead son is not only alive, he has been restored. And Jesus gives him to his mother.

Again, a severed relationship has been restored. Again, a widow has hope for the future.

The crowd is seized with fear. We can hear them say, “Who is this that raises the dead? It’s the same fear the disciples expressed when Jesus calmed the sea and the waves in the storm, “Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?”

I wonder if the first and most honest response to an encounter with God is not fear. I wonder if this is, in part, what Martin Luther had in mind in his explanation of the Ten Commandments: “You should fear and love God so that . . .”

The second response of the crowd is praise: They glorify God and exclaim, “God has raised up a great prophet among us! God has visited us and looked favorably on us!”

Our texts for today tell us about God and God’s compassion for us. Today we have two dramatic stories that demonstrate that love, manifested in the power to raise the dead.

And in both stories, the response to God’s action is praise. In the story of Elijah, the woman responds, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” Her response is an affirmation of faith. In our gospel, the response is heard from the crowd: “God has raised up a great prophet among us! God has visited us and looked favorably on us!”

God acts out of compassion, and we respond.

This past Monday, Memorial Day, there was a second emergency surgery, this time after being two weeks in intensive care. How much more could a tired body take. The same patient and, amazingly, the same surgeon. It seemed that he came back to the family waiting room too soon. But his words were reassuring. The breach in the body had been repaired, and the internal organs look better than 12 days before. For the second time that day, the family holds hands, forming a circle, to pray. The first prayer had been for safety and healing, that God would keep the patient safe and guide the hands of the surgeon. This time it is a prayer of thanksgiving, ending with the Doxology:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heav'nly hosts;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
(*ELW 884*)

God acts through the skills and medicines of the medical profession, as well as through prayer, and the family gives thanks and praise.

Our prayers are not always answered in the ways we would like. Our stories don't always end the way the stories in our readings today end. Our loved ones are not always restored to us.

Our psalmist, singing from a time even earlier than our prophet Elijah, insists,

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning. . . .
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy . . .

“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Sometimes the night seems long, ever so long. Yet the acclamation of the crowd in the gospel still holds: “God has visited us and looked favorably on us!”

God's abiding presence among us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, visited upon us through the Holy Spirit, is ours in all circumstances of our lives. The sure and certain hope of God's presence among us elicits our thanks and praise. Our lives in Christ are lives of gratitude.

When we live our lives in gratitude to God, the only death is a life devoid of gratitude, a life devoid of thanks and praise, and a life devoid of gratitude is not worth living.

Thanks be to God!