

## **Pentecost 3(C). Proper 5. June 5, 2016. I Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17.**

I grew up in a church that taught us to believe in miracles. That was fine, until my family needed a miracle, expected a miracle, and didn't get a miracle. I'm not angry with that church for teaching us to believe in miracles. Today I prefer to say that I believe in a God who can perform miracles, rather than believing in the miracles themselves, but I'm not angry about the pain caused by expecting and not getting a miracle. But what does still bother me is what that church didn't teach us, which was how to live before the miracle. And, as too many of you will know, that "before" can stretch out for the rest of our lives.

In today's readings we heard of two miracles, two spectacular raisings from the dead. First, Elijah revives the dead son of this poor widow in Zarephath. And then in the Gospel, Luke deliberately echoes this Elijah story in the way Jesus revives the dead son of a widow of Nain. Now, if we were to want to do anything so audacious as to think about the original intention of the authors, then the miracles are clearly the climaxes of these stories. In each case, the point is that these miraculous events validate the ministries of new prophets. Elijah has just appeared on the scene, and Jesus' public ministry is also new at this point—he has just given the Sermon on the Plain (Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount), which is kind of like an inaugural address. And then Jesus goes on a healing tour, of which this is the second leg. These miracles show the mourners and bystanders in each story that God is at work here and that these men are reliable witnesses to God's reality.

But in our age of complacent skepticism, a miracle from thousands of years ago probably isn't going to touch us where it matters. Which is why I don't want us to rush to the miracle: because it's cool, but by definition it is outside of our normal flow of life. We don't really need to be told to believe in miracles; we need to learn how to live before the miracle or maybe, if we're very lucky, after the miracle. The widow of Zarephath, from the Elijah story, and Jesus from, well, the Jesus story, show us two perspectives on how to live before the miracle.

The Elijah story teaches us that in our life before the miracle, radical hospitality will, against all rational calculations, save us. Elijah appears on the public scene more or less out of nowhere because Israel's king and queen are worshiping the wrong God. And so Elijah announces that there will be a drought until he tells it stop, and that's not going to happen until the king and queen switch their allegiance back to the God who called Israel out of Egypt and into a land of their own. But as we know, unless sanctions are targeted pretty precisely at weapons and luxury items, the people who get hit first are the poor, and a drought is a pretty blunt instrument. Fascinatingly, Elijah declares this universal drought and then God immediately drives him to stay with this poor widow at Zarephath—he does what he takes to be God's will and then is sent directly to a person who is a striking example of "collateral damage."

God sends Elijah to the poor widow at Zarephath so that she can provide for him during the drought, but somehow the message doesn't get to the widow. So she's pretty suspicious of this guy who shows up to use a big chunk of the precious few resources she has to care for herself and her son. And on top of that, he is the one who has declared this drought that is helping keep those resources so scarce. The part of the story we didn't read this morning tells how Elijah came to stay with her just when she was planning to make a final meal for her and her son and then they would die. But she divides the meal into three, giving Elijah some, and the next day, there is again enough for three. And so on, until we get to this part of the story, where her son gets ill and, though the wording is a little ambiguous, he dies and Elijah revives him through the time tested laying on top of the dead person technique.

This story is my favorite expression of one of the threads that runs throughout the entire Bible: that radical hospitality, welcoming and caring for even the person who by all rights should be your enemy, in some way saves us. For the widow of Zarephath, it is through a miraculous replenishing of her cupboard and the raising of her son. For us, it may be less dramatic, but this thread is so persistent throughout the Bible that if it is untrue that welcoming the stranger and enemy in some way works our salvation, then the Bible is a lie. And the widow begins her work of hospitality before she has any evidence that there will be a miracle, before she trusts this guy,

before she has any reason to believe that he is a genuine messenger from God. This is how we live before the miracle, when we ourselves are the ones who need the miracle: we welcome, we care for, we give, and we trust that our salvation resides within that very act of welcoming, caring, and giving.

Jesus is coming from something of a different angle. He himself is not here suffering, not here needing a miracle. He has just finished a big sermon early in his public ministry and then has healed the centurion's slave in the story we read last week. And what especially catches my eye in this gospel story is the remarkable narrowing of focus, from huge crowds to the most intimate setting. Jesus is headed toward this town, followed by a large crowd of early disciples, curious onlookers, potential enemies, and kids just joining in the fun of a carnival procession. And as this ragged procession approaches, another huge crowd is leaving the town, this crowd composed of family and friends and neighbors and religious leaders and town elders all accompanying this widow and her boy's body out of the city and out to the burial place.

So we need to picture two very large crowds converging, like when our choir finishes rehearsal Sunday morning just as Wiggle Worship pours into coffee hour. Well, that times 50. And amid all this hubbub and tumult, Jesus fixes on the widow. He sees *her*, has compassion for *her*, speaks to *her*, and moves forward to stand with *her*, eventually culminating in the intimacy of touching the coffin, even though doing so made him ritually unclean. Now we know the end of the story because we just read it: we know that he calls this son back from the dead. And probably if any of us were in Jesus' place, we wouldn't quite be able to pull that off. But this story tells us a lot about how we should live before the miracle.

With no husband or son, this unmothered widow has no place or standing in society. In all the crazy hurly burly of these two crowds, or just of life, Jesus *sees* the person whom society has made invisible. He refuses to let his eyes slide away from her in the way we have all been trained to do when we see the homeless, the elderly, the conventionally unbeautiful. He lets her grief touch him, affect him, change him. He allows someone else's pain to interrupt whatever important errand he was on, which isn't a bad definition of compassion—to allow your life to be interrupted by someone else's pain. He speaks to her, addresses her, engages her. He stands with her, in solidarity. He shares her place. He risks ritual impurity and social standing by offering intimacy in touching the coffin. He stands with her even when it costs him something.

As I said, we probably can't call people back from the dead. But we can do everything else "before the miracle." This is how we live. In our own pain, we still welcome the stranger, knowing that he or she may well be our salvation. And in the pain of others, we see, we feel, we speak, we stand. We touch and are touched. It may not be calling folks back from the dead, but it is very much living fully in life. Amen.