

OUT OF DEATH, LIFE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

June 6, 2010

Scripture: I Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17

Two stories of life rising from death are remembered today in the lectionary assignments for this Sunday so long after Easter that the lilies themselves have wilted and died.

One is the story of Jesus raising up the son of a widow, in Nain, a Jewish town halfway between Nazareth and Esdraelon.

The other is the story of the prophet Elijah bringing to life a widow's son in the Gentile town of Zarephath, on the coast, just South of Sidon. An Iron Age story, separated from Jesus by 9 centuries.

But the words and the vocabulary and the similarities of the details of the two stories tell us that they are parallels, that the account in Luke's gospel, the later account, is meant to sound like and be immediately recognized as Elijah's story, even though it's Jesus who is playing the role of Elijah this time. Luke doesn't want us to miss the fact that there are echoes of Elijah in Jesus, and God's intention for life knows no bounds or generation.

Jesus knew the story of Elijah, in fact he must have had a chill run up and down his spine as he raised that woman's son to life, that widow woman in Nain. He knew that what he was doing was the very thing that Elijah had done so long before him in Zarephath.

He had Elijah on his mind, we know that. The story is there, three chapters before, in Luke, chapter 4. He spoke about it in his hometown of Nazareth where he tells those who are listening that the story of Elijah being sent to a widow in Zarephath was being fulfilled in their hearing that day. And not long after he would act that out.

Three chapters later when Jesus enters the town of Nain, he runs into a funeral procession where a widow is grieving her son. And he stops things cold, and tells the son who is lying on a stretcher - no doubt lying in a shroud, arms folded in repose across his chest - Jesus told him to stand up. He speaks to this boy's corpse like it could hear him. "Rise," he says to the boy lying on the stretcher. And the young man did, he stood right up, and he began to speak, and when he did, Luke says, Jesus "gave him to his mother."

It was the same thing in Zarephath long before. Israel was in the middle of a drought, no food, no water, things were looking desperate. And as the story goes, at God's direction Elijah found a widow gathering some sticks, sticks to make a small fire, enough to heat some grainy meal, the little she had left. Her plan was that she and her son would eat a morsel, sit by the fire, and wait to die. The drought and scarcity was that desperate.

Elijah asked her for something to drink and something to eat, and even though she had almost nothing, she gave him what she had and Elijah was strengthened. When she went to feed her son and herself, there was still enough. In fact, her meal and oil and water did not fail during the drought and scarcity, and from that time forward, she had enough.

But the story doesn't end there. The widow's son was worn down by an illness, and even though he had enough to eat, he soon died. The mother pleaded with Elijah to do something, "Had he come only to bring a curse?" she asked. Elijah, sensing not only his but also God's reputation was at stake in this matter, he carried the boy to an upper room and stretched out upon him three times, a kind of Ninth Century BC cardio resuscitation, and the boy came to life, and the writer of I Kings says Elijah "gave the boy to his mother."

It's hard to tell in either of these stories what the age of the sons involved might have been, whether they were children, teenagers, or young adults. I tend to think that they were a bit older, perhaps in their teens, helpers to their mothers, and therefore key not only in the devotion of the women but also playing a role in their survival. It is certain that they were all these widows had left. And the sadness and grief of these mothers would have been overwhelming because the loss of a child is always heartbreaking.

Nowhere in life is death more painful than in the death of a child. The grief and fear of these women, their sense of abandonment must have been crushing. You cannot read their stories without being moved, for both give evidence to the compassion of God for those who are overwhelmed by death.

Perhaps what we see most clearly in these stories is the intention of God for good, the power of God over death, and the desire for life that lies close to the heart of God.

Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Seminary has written, "Resurrection is the sign that God not only prefers life but has the power to make good on [the] promise that life will prove stronger than death."¹ I love Cynthia's understatement, her simple way of saying that God *prefers life over death*.

Frankly that's a word worth hearing after a week like this. We've seen a lot of death lately. Over the past month and a half the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has dumped somewhere between 12,000 and 20,000 barrels of oil a day into the ecosystem of the Gulf region, killing more and more as it spreads. The eggs of the blue fin tuna are covered with oil in the marshes of Louisiana. The oysters which are filter feeders cannot swim to avoid the slicks. It's nesting season for the sea turtles, and they must come to the water's surface to breathe, but this year the surface is coated in oil and so are the turtles.

A hundred miles of Louisiana's four hundred mile coastland is covered in oil and dispersant this year, and children used to going to the beach will not be going there this season or anytime in the near future either. The birds and marine life, the flora and fauna of the Gulf coast may never be the same again. Endangered species are vanishing as we

sit here today. Pelicans are laying eggs in crude soaked nests, and sometimes I think I can hear their wailing all the way up here in the concrete canyons of New York. Whatever Katrina spared in the Gulf five years ago is now endangered again and this time the damage is irreparable.

Death is playing a powerful hand against the Creation right now and we feel powerless to do much of anything about it except hope and pray that some bright engineering idea to cap the gusher proves successful.

And as if that weren't enough to discourage, there was that other body of water in the news this week.

Last Monday a flotilla of activists aboard six ships were stopped by Israeli naval commandos in open waters in the Mediterranean near Gaza. On one of the ships, the Mavi Marmara, nine people were killed resisting the commandos boarding the ship. The news has been full of spin and accusations and blame ever since. The name calling and fury, the claims of contraband and weapons stashes, the videos of commandos being beaten and thrown overboard, as well as an American born 19 year old who was shot once in the chest and four times in the head at close range have been painful to hear about.

It would be easy to say the Palestinian activists should not have resisted the IDF forces as they did. Easy to say that the Israeli commandos were too quick to board and use deadly force. Easy when it's not your harbor and not your conflict and not your sons and daughters who are involved. Easy when you have to make someone the villain and someone the victim in a mess where there is enough of every kind of blame to go around.

One thing is for sure, a little bit of justice and peace dies for all of us each time such an incident takes place. Justice and peace get delayed in a way that kills the spirit and hurts the soul. The power of death tries to overtake the power of life when such things happen.

This week, I don't know whether it was the discouraging news of tar balls and oil slicks washing onto the marshland and beaches of four states in the Gulf that got me discouraged, or whether it was the prospect of preparing for a General Assembly of Presbyterians gathering in Minneapolis in July hoping to do something positive about our denomination's stand on the Israeli/ Palestinian conflict and who seem instead, ready to add to the problems in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict that most discouraged me.

Maybe it was the letter that I received from a friend with whom I have been in correspondence lately.

Toward the end of his typewritten letter he wrote, "Yesterday was the one year anniversary of the Memorial Service for my wife. A person from hospice telephoned to tell me that the period of grief counseling is over." My friend continued, "I may not know about eternal life, but I am convinced that grief is eternal." I'm sure the hospice people know that, but grief counseling is still only complimentary for one year.

With his letter I remembered that in these coming months there are several friends whom I know who are likely not going to be with us much longer, age and illness and the unexpected being what it is. When I was twenty and thirty, no one was dying. When I was forty everyone was dying. But when I was fifty things went back to normal for the most part, death was only an occasional visitor, and so it's been until now. But I am getting older and I see that death still has her sting sometimes, like the embittered and lonely wasp that hangs around in October long after all the others have given up and died.

Which is why I am thankful that before we enter another week, before any more time passes or any more news comes about the Gulf, or any more stories emerge from the high seas around Gaza, or anyone else is diagnosed, we may have today, and we may hear these stories of two widows who thought life was over because their cherished sons were dead, and God brought them back to life because God prefers life to death.

And that is, of course, what it is that we remember at this table where we remember the one who said, "I am come that you might have life and that you might have it abundantly." He who asked "Can any of you by worrying, add a single hour to your span of life?" He, of whom it was said, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all." Jesus, who said to his disciples, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." Jesus, who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and whosoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Here at this table, remembering him, his death and his resurrection, I am encouraged to believe that what is beyond my ability to control and to guide in life, is not beyond God's ability to guide or control. And that God has already made it plain that life will overcome death in the end, even though death from time to time may not be ready to acknowledge that.

Here at this table I am strengthened to go on, to reaffirm my belief that God will care for the earth beyond our ability to despoil the earth. That God's intentions for peace and for justice will finally overcome our failing efforts to do the same which usually end in violence and injustice in spite of ourselves. That God even heals and restores our broken and ailing and aging bodies, as God did in Elijah's time, calling to life a widow's son in Zarephath of Sidon, and in Jesus' time calling to life a widow's son in the little village of Nain, halfway between Nazareth and Esdraelon.

Here at this table in the bread and the cup, we remember how much God has given for the sake of life, our life, every life. God knows what it is to lose his own son, like the widow of Nain, like the widow of Zarapheth. And as God raised those sons, so God will raise us one day from the dead that we may sit at another table in God's good time and in God's good making, and there the waters will be pure and the river sweet. There at that table enemies will have become friends, tears will have become laughter, no more divisions among the nations, no more death but life, and there will be the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

In her commentary on the raising of the widow's son in Nain, Francois Bovon calls the encounter at the gate of Nain "a meeting between a parade of life (Jesus and his disciples) and a parade of death (the dead man, his mother, and the grieving crowd).² It's an interesting contrast. Somewhere in the Talmud – for all the scrupulosity of the rabbis to provide an answer to every imaginable circumstance – there's a provision to the effect that when a funeral procession and a wedding procession happen to come to an intersection at the same time, the wedding procession has the right of way – because life always has the right of way over death.³

So it is that here at this table death gives way to life, because life always has the right of way over death.

So come and draw strength for the journey, come and find nourishment for your soul. Come and remember that in life and in death we belong to God.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2010.

¹ Cynthia Campbell, Moveable Feast paper on this text, 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, unpublished, Chapel Hill, NC, January, 2010, p. 5.

² Francois Bovon, **Luke**. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002, 267.

³ Thanks to Richard Spalding for this recollection which is noted in his Moveable Feast paper, Ordinary 10, Luke 7: 11-24. Tuscaloosa, AL, January, 2007