

1 Kings 17:17-24, Psalm 30, Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17

*Conquering Death*

“But Elijah said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried 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?"”

Usually when I preach a sermon, I like to start with a verse I love from the day’s readings. But today, instead, I just read what must be the worst verse from the passages for today. A child has died, the only son of his widowed mother. He is gone, and she is bereft and heartbroken.

And Elijah has just said it is God’s fault. He has just cried out to God and accused the LORD of killing the woman’s son.

Can we say that? That when people die, it is because God kills them? That sounds wrong, as if Elijah was claiming that this child’s death was the result of some malice on the part of God.

The Phoenician widow in this story didn’t even worship God – not the God of Israel. Yet she is the one who makes this accusation against God, which Elijah passes on to the Lord. Let look for a moment at why this language might be used in this particular story.

Let’s start by looking at the woman’s own religion, where she had two Gods to worship. One was Baal – the rain god, the god of fertility – whom we hear about a lot in the Old Testament, because the people of Israel keep worshipping him when they are supposed to worship only the LORD.

Baal was believed to bring the rains each year, and through those rains, to bring life to the earth. But in this mythology, he had a rival god – Mot. Mot was the god of death. And every year, Mot overpowered Baal – killed him, in fact, and that brought about the dry season, when the rains ended.

But at the end of the dry season, Mot would release Baal again for a time, and the rains would come once more. The two gods, Baal and Mot, were locked in a constant struggle with no permanent victor.

The stories of Elijah the prophet are all stories about how the LORD God of Israel had power that utterly surpassed the imagined powers of these two Canaanite gods.

Elijah appears in the Bible just a few verses before our story begins today, and he appears proclaiming a drought. The drought is the direct result of the sin of King Ahab, who was worshipping Baal at the instigation of his wife, Jezebel. And the drought proves how foolish King Ahab’s idolatry is, because when Ahab decided to worship the false rain god Baal, the LORD, the true God of Israel, stopped all the rain.

And He stopped the rain not only in Israel. In Sidon, a pagan, Baal-worshiping region, God had stopped the rain there, as well, and drought is affecting the Phoenician widow in this story. So clearly we see here that the LORD God has far more power than Baal, if Baal even existed.

But Baal was only half the story for his worshipers. He was the giver of rain and fertility and life. But he had no real power over death. That was the domain of Mot. So why would the widow give credit for her son's death not to Mot, but to Israel's god?

Perhaps because there was an Israelite prophet living in her house, putting the LORD on her mind, or perhaps putting her and her family on the LORD's mind. Or perhaps because her heart had been turned toward God by the miracle that precedes this story today – when God causes her flour and oil to miraculously not run out, when she had expected that she and her son were about to starve.

Whatever the reason, her belief that Elijah's God has power not only over life, Baal's supposed domain, but also over death, is borne out in the incredible miracle that follows.

Not even in the life of Moses do we find a prophet bringing someone dead back to life. But here the God of Israel defeats the power of death – the supposed power of Mot. And the child is filled once more the breath of life, just as he was when God first gave him life.

Thank heaven that God has both those powers – the power over life and the power over death. Thank the LORD that death is not stronger – that God's authority prevails even over that last enemy.

We don't want to have to say that God might cause a death. But there is some comfort in hearing that even death couldn't happen outside of God's power – because if the power of death was outside of God's control, that would be a much worse and a terrifying thing.

And so, difficult as it is for us to bear or accept, God does allow death to happen. For now. But we are comforted and given hope by these stories of resurrection, which remind us of the power of God and His ultimate resurrection in Jesus Christ. The resurrection that teaches us that even death is only a temporary pain. God's power and life triumph permanently at the empty tomb.

And so we find the overpowering force of life in Jesus Christ. When we come upon him in the passage from Luke we hear today, he, too, raises a widow's son from death to life.

Where Elijah picked up the child, and lay upon him, and begged God for help, Jesus has but to speak a few words – “Young man, I say to you, rise!” And the breath of life surges into the young man once more. And the power of life bursting into the mortal world fills the crowd with awe, and even with some fear.

And it is in this story that St. Luke, for the first time, calls Jesus “Lord.” This power over life – and this power over death – are what marks Him as God. The voice of life that calls the dead to spring to life is the voice of God.

And so, when Jesus approaches the dead young man, Luke calls him “Lord.” And Jesus tells his mother – “Do not weep”. And he touches the bier, and he speaks to the man, and death is overpowered by the Living God.

But actually, St. Luke calls Jesus “Lord” a line before he actually displays his power over death. In fact, it’s before he speaks or moves a hand. Here is the sentence where St. Luke first identifies Jesus as “Lord” in his whole Gospel:

“When the Lord saw [the widow], he had compassion for her and said, ‘Do not weep.’”

It seems to me that St. Luke points us to a second truth about God at the same time here. The Living God is known by his power over life and his power over death. But here he is known, too, by something else – his compassion.

The Lord saw, and he was moved with compassion for her. Or as the New International Version of the Bible translates the phrase – “his heart went out to her”.

But this word is my favorite word in Scripture, and what it most literally means is that he was “wrenched in his gut for her”. His compassion, his empathy, was that intense for her, as though he felt her pain with her.

That is how deeply our Lord loves. That is how we know him. And how we are called to imitate him.

Whatever pains and grief we encounter in our lives, our Lord is there with us in them. He sees us, and he comes to us, and his heart is wrenched for us.

And though this does not bring every pain to an end in an instant, does not prevent every grief or loss, it does promise an end to grief and pain and loss.

Though we cannot comprehend the mystery of why the world is as it is, why suffering still persists, for now, we know – because of God’s word, and God’s compassion, and God’s resurrection, that it will end.

God does not hold Himself back from suffering – he does not hold Himself at a distance from our suffering, and He willingly went Himself to the suffering of the Cross to conquer death forever, and offer us life.

And through both God’s compassion and his Living power, we know Him, and we hear Him promise for us a way through this fleeting, bittersweet, mortal life, into a future of joy and life that will be everlasting.

Amen.