

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 24, 2023

1 Kings 17:17-24

“The Name of the Lord Be Praised”

After these events, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. The illness became worse until he stopped breathing.

Then she said to Elijah, “What is the issue between us, man of God? Have you come to remind me of my sins and to kill my son?”

He said to her, “Bring your son to me.” Then he took him and carried him to the upstairs room where he was living, and he laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the LORD, “O LORD, my God, have you sent tragedy on this woman with whom I am staying by killing her son?”

Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times, and he cried out to the LORD, “O LORD, my God, let this boy’s soul return to his body!” The LORD listened to Elijah’s voice, and the boy’s soul returned to his body, and he came to life. Then Elijah took the boy and brought him down to the house from his upstairs room, and he gave him to his mother.

Elijah said, “See, your son is alive!”

The woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is true.”

Last week, before the reading of the First Lesson, you were asked to try to remember that story until this week. As explained then, this week’s sermon text, which follows right after that lesson, begins with the phrase: **After these events**. Do you remember “these events from last week,” the events that lead right into this story?

In case you were absent last week due to illness or being out of the area: these events from last week could be summed up simply like this: The Lord rescues the lives of three of his people. The Lord has promised to send an extended drought to Israel to punish its wicked King Ahab. After the prophet Elijah announces the coming drought to the king, Elijah runs and hides in a ravine.

But eventually, the stream runs out. Elijah has nowhere to go, nothing to drink, and nothing to eat. But the Lord tells him what to do next: go to a widow in the Gentile land of Sidon. The Lord has done the prep work of commanding a widow there to provide for Elijah.

But when Elijah arrives, that widow, who also believes in the Lord God of Israel, announces that her food is almost gone. She has only enough flour left for a last meal for herself and her son. When Elijah asks her for a piece of bread, this is her heartbreaking answer: **“See, I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I can go and prepare it for myself and my son, that we can eat it and then die.”**

Three believers – a prophet, widow, and her son – face death by starvation. But the Lord speaks through Elijah and tells the widow, **“Do not be afraid.”** He promises her that her supply will not run out until the drought has ended. And – miraculously – the widow believes that promise. She proves her faith by feeding Elijah before herself and her son. But then the three keep on eating and eating, just as the Lord said they would.

The Lord saves the lives of three believers with a miracle. That's "these events" in a nutshell. But the story of Elijah, the widow, and her son, does not end there.

It appears the widow has repaid Elijah and the Lord with a free room for Elijah to stay in. That seems fair, right? Miraculously save me and my son, and you can sleep upstairs! But then the health of the widow's son declines. The verbs indicate a gradual downhill slide for the son **until he stopped breathing.**

And the widow, with her faith so strong, proves that no sinner's faith is perfect: **Then she said to Elijah, "What is the issue between us, man of God? Have you come to remind me of my sins and to kill my son?"** Her accusatory questions blame Elijah for her son's death. But she's not just blaming him. She calls him, "man of God." Her word for "God," "Elohim," preaches the sovereign power of God. God has complete control. So ultimately, he is to blame for this tragedy.

Before we get the happy part of the story, let's get even sadder! This widow has to deal with one death of one child. There was a man who had to deal with worse. "What could be worse," you ask. **While he was still speaking, another servant came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their oldest brother. Suddenly a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it collapsed on the young people, and they died, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"** Do you recognize where that's from? It's Job chapter 1, verses eighteen to nineteen. Job did not suffer the death of one child. He suffered the death of all ten of them all at once. But what did Job do differently than the widow? The last verse of the chapter says: **In all this, Job did not blame God.** What did he do instead? He praised the name of the Lord. **Then Job stood up, tore his robe, and shaved his head. He fell to the ground and worshipped. Then he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. May the name of the LORD be praised."**

What is the difference between the widow and Job? Why do they react so differently? They are both believers in the true God. Death strikes them both with grief; Job shaved his head and tore his robes, both signs of distress and sorrow. But one blames God while the other praises the name of the Lord. The difference is that Job sees a resurrection, and the widow does not. Not yet, anyway.

People die because sin is fatal to our physical bodies. We do need to be careful how we say that. It's not right to think someone has died because God was getting back at them or someone in their family for something they did wrong. That's what the widow thinks might be happening when she asks, **"Have you come to remind me of my sins and to kill my son?"** Don't try to connect specific sins to a death; but do connect sin in general to death. Scripture certainly does: **The wages of sin is death. The soul that sins will die.**

But God has answered the death our sin deserves with life. **[Elijah] said to her, "Bring your son to me." The he took him and carried him to the upstairs room where he was living, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried to the LORD, "O LORD, my God..."** The widow called God "Elohim," the God of power and control. Elijah calls him by that name, too. But not only by that name. He also calls God "Yahweh," the Lord. The name Yahweh preaches God's gracious love, his faithfulness to his promises, his compassion toward the suffering. Not only that: the name Yahweh proclaims that God is life. The name is built off the word "to be," teaching that the Lord is constant and unchanging, eternal and undying.

And Elijah calls the Lord, the God of love, the God of promises, the God of life, **“my God.”** Only when that Lord is your God could you ask this: **“O LORD, my God, let this boy’s soul return to his body.”** **The LORD listened to Elijah’s voice, and the boy’s soul returned to his body, and he came to life.**

The Lord, our God, is the God of life. He is the God who even gives life to the dead. In the end the widow, whose faith was shaken by her son’s death, calls God by the same name. Because now she has seen the full truth of it: He is the God who gives life to the dead. He is the Lord.

When Job heard the news of his children’s deaths, he did not praise the name of God. He praised the name of the Lord. Because Job knew and believed that the Lord is the God of life. That’s what makes praise possible, even at the hour of a Christian’s death. Job did not get to see a resurrection quite like the widow did. But he definitely saw one. He looked through time and prophesied the resurrection of his Savior, and therefore of himself, and of all who trust the Lord: **“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the end of time he will stand over the dust. Then, even after my skin has been destroyed, nevertheless in my own flesh I will see God. I myself will see him. My own eyes will see him, and not as a stranger.”**

Job saw the Savior’s resurrection, and his own, and his children’s. The widow saw her son’s. And then the name of the Lord, the God of life, was praised.

On some Sundays it’s a challenge to see the connection between the sections of Scripture we hear in worship. This is not one of those Sundays. Jesus sees a widow whose son has died, and does not want her to cry. So he raises her Son. The stories are so similar that a little child can see the connection. But here is one difference between the two resurrections. When Jesus raises the widow’s son, he does not call on the Lord to raise the son. Instead, Jesus himself speaks to dead man directly and specifically and commands him to rise. Jesus resurrects directly because he is himself the Lord who holds power over death. And when Jesus gives this resurrection, his name – the name of the Lord – is praised all over the Judean countryside.

And so Jesus himself raises and widow’s son and, like Elijah, gives him back to his mother. We can imagine the joy of those mothers embracing their sons again and living happily with them for perhaps a few decades more. That we can only imagine.

But we will experience something even better by far. We will experience the glorious resurrection of all believers in Jesus on the Last Day. We, like Job, look ahead to that day and declare with confidence: Our Redeemer lives, and even after our flesh is destroyed by death, we will live again and see him. We will rise on that day and see him with our own eyes.

Elijah cried out to the Lord for a resurrection, and the Lord gave him one that lasted a little while. He stretched himself out three times over the boy (I wonder why three times?) and raised him for a few more years. Jesus came to Nain to give a resurrection that lasted a few years, too. But the Lord of life also came to give a resurrection to all who believe in him, a resurrection that will last forever. The Lord, the God of compassion came to miserable sinners and clothed them in holiness. The Lord, the God of grace, came to suffer and die for them in undeserved love. The Lord, the God of life, came with power over death and conquered it for good on Easter morning.

Thanks to what the Lord Jesus has done for us, all believers in Jesus will rise to see their Redeemer. Then he will give sons back to mothers, as well as friends back to friends, and daughters back to fathers, and

sisters back to brothers. But on that Last Day he will give them back never to be separated by death again, to live together in glory. In fact, Jesus will give all who believe in him – even those who have never met in this world – life forever together with each other and with him.

There are two basic ways for believers to treat death. We can be like the widow before her son's death, and treat it like it's the end, something to blame God for, something he uses to punish us. And sadly, this is the way Jesus' people often treat death: as a permanent goodbye. Or we say things that at least imply God has made some kind of mistake: "She's gone before her time" or "He's gone too soon." Or we act like it's the worst thing that could happen to a believer in Jesus.

Let's remember: the Lord has come to us. He has come with his compassion to give the holiness we need to live with God; he has come with grace, the undeserved love that took him to the cross to pay for our sins; he has come with life to rise, and give us a resurrection in the power of his own.

So death is not the end, even for our bodies. It's nothing to blame God for because it's not all, or even mostly bad. And when it comes, it's never God's mistake. It's a blessing, even though it hurts and separates for a little while. Even when believers die they live. So praise the name of the Lord. And their bodies will rise, too.

So when death comes to a believer, be like Job and praise the name of the Lord. His name means compassion. His name means grace. His name means life. It's the name of the Lord who comes to turn death into resurrection and life that lasts forever. May the name of the Lord be praised. Amen.