

1 Kings 17:17-24
Luke 7:11-17

“Life, Against All Odds”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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10th Ordinary

I’m sure these two scriptures are paired in the lectionary because they are almost (but not quite) identical. Elijah revives the son of the widow with whom he had been staying, and Jesus revives the only son of a widow in the town of Nain. Such resurrections do happen in various places in the Bible, but they are always special and powerful tales when they are told. Elijah and Elisha both restored life to the young. And you may remember one of my sermons from awhile back on the time Jesus raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha.

Luke uses the exact same language from the Elijah story – Elijah “gave him to his mother”; “Jesus gave him to his mother”; to give his readers a sense of continuity, of identification. This that Jesus was doing – that’s what God *does*! They would know this story, and that helps them into the new story, about Jesus.

There are some differences, though. Elijah stretches himself out on the boy 3 times, before crying out to God. They had some strange ideas in those times – that the sickness of a child was punishment for the sins of the parents. Later on, Jesus would argue against the same odd belief. Ancient people also had some idea about “contactual magic”, that you could transfer sin into an animal or a clay figure, or that the healer could draw the disease into the healer’s own self and away from the sick one. One thinks of the image of Christ stretched on the cross – perhaps God’s own “contact magic” to draw our sin away. That’s probably what Elijah was doing. It sounds to me more like CPR (cardio pulmonary resuscitation). Maybe it was, who knows. Nowhere does the Hebrew actually say that Elijah’s patient was actually dead. The word can also show weak life, or a loss of senses.

But the story from Luke is different. Luke says this mother’s only son was dead, and Jesus comes upon them in the funeral procession. Unlike Elijah, Jesus never touches him, and never calls out to God the Father, but goes on to command him to arise. (Just as he did calling “Lazarus, come out!”) Skeptics may come up with other explanations, but this is the point of this story to the early church — it was a resurrection from death. And this is not a private miracle, as is the Elijah story. Jesus does this in full public view, and the gospel writer presents it as a statement of Jesus’ ministry and purpose. Jesus changes both life and death, and those things don’t mean the same anymore.

Much of all religion is about life and death, not just in Christianity, but in most faiths. I was reading the Elijah story, and thinking about the people I grew up around. Navajos have a very strong death taboo. They don’t go near dead bodies if at all possible; the old ones would not even enter a Hogan where someone had died. No self-respecting Navajo would have stretched him or her self out on someone presumed dead, like Elijah did. “I’ll hold the horses; *you* do it!”

We have euphemisms for death, even when we’re adopting a flippant attitude about it. There was the Monty Python skit about the dead parrot sold in the pet store, and the proprietor won’t admit he has sold a dead parrot to the customer. “He’s resting,” says the store owner. And in response to the store clerk’s denial of death, the customer launches into a tirade of protestation, banging the parrot on the counter while he recites a litany of every euphemism in the British Isles to avoid

saying the word “death.” : “This parrot is deceased. It is demised, passed on, it is no more, it has ceased to be, expired, gone to meet his maker, joined the choir invisible, pulled down the curtain, a stiff, rests in peace and would be pushing up daisies if you hadn’t nailed his feet to the perch. It is an *ex-parrot!*” What made that skit a comedy classic was that we recognize in it our own discomfort and denial.

The exception would be the lowland Scots, who treated death with a macabre sense of humor – possibly because they believed so strongly in the immortality of the soul that they found it humorous to make a fuss over the departure of the flesh. There is a story that in 19th century Scotland a Laird had a dinner party which began early and ended who knows how many hours later with the continued circulation of the wine bottle. As the pale and haggard light of a Scottish morning began to press its face through the window, the host noticed that one of his guests looked ill and had been silent a long spell. What makes the Laird of Garscadden look so pale?” he asked. “Och,” came the reply from further down the table. “He slippit awa’ tae his Maker twa hours since, but I dinna like tae disturb good company by mentionin’ it.”

But death and resurrection is no laughing matter for most of us. Many of us have been close to it, peered over that precipice. Almost all of us have lost to death someone dear. And these texts may ring hollow for those who are facing death today, and for those who know that loss. Magic Bible stories from long ago, but it doesn’t happen today, we might say. We might say like Martha did about Lazarus: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.”

I think most Christians have, in relation to death, an odd combination of fear and bravado. Death is *not-life*, in some ways it is the ultimate enemy. And yet we have the promises of our faith that God never lets us go, and that not even death can snatch us from that hand. Probably for most of us some days we believe it and some we don’t. Or perhaps we can only make jokes about it, as those lowland Scots did, because we are like children watched over by Jesus – who, because we are watched over, can run up to the monster and poke it with a stick and then run away. But when death strikes close to home, no poking-the-monster really works.

We rightly fear death for those we love and, usually, for our own selves, even while we *do* trust Christ’s resurrection to count for us as well. Each other person’s death is some reminder of our own frailty and our own mortality. That unfleshed spirit which the Navajos fear, that could come and claim us as well. And maybe it ought to be that way – that each other person’s death is also my own.

John Donne wrote in 1629: *"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."*

Which is why I think there is something else going on in these scriptures. Elijah and Jesus both come to the aid of someone who is defenseless, and powerless in that society. Widows were vulnerable then. A patriarchal world granted them no protection, no livelihood, without a male head of household. Particularly the widow of Nain, who has but one adult son, and without him her very life is in danger.

Luke says: “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.” And that’s what this text is about. It is not a story about power so much as a story about love, compassion. Jesus’ overriding concern is with the widow. He “had compassion”, and “gave (the son) to his mother.”

And so that compassion may be our vocation, our calling, out of these stories. Our knees may knock and our voice may tremble as we shout “No more death! Christ is Risen!” And we shout it at all those many forces in this world that subjugate life. Compassion and raising the dead are linked. Jesus reclaimed life for those pronounced dead by others.

No mas Muerte!, say those who work for Borderlinks, and try to keep alive those crossing the border and the deserts of Arizona. If every person’s death in Darfur is my death, then it has to start to matter to the world, and maybe something can change. If every child shot and killed in north Birmingham is my death, then maybe something can start to change. It is true that when all that pain is internalized, a person gets “compassion fatigue” – you can’t care that much all the time. But our basic stance of living in the world can be a life lived in the awareness that we *are* God’s children, and my life and death is bound up in the life and death of others. It can change the decisions we make, and how we take our stance in this world. Jesus reclaims life for those who have been written off by others.

The Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton once claimed he was responsible for the holocaust. “How can that be?” said his friends. “You were a mere child, not a Nazi, not even a German.” He explained that he hadn’t said that it was his fault, but rather that he was responsible. He chose to be responsible.

The Good News is, Christ chose to be responsible for us. Chose us even when we may have written off our own selves. And has made our death, and our life, his own. He carries us, if you would have it. The other night I heard Alabama songwriter Pierce Pettis at Sojourns, the fair trade store over here on 3rd Avenue. And he sang this:

*When you start to doubt if you exist, God believes in you.
Confounded by the evidence, God believes in you.
When your chances seem so slim, when your light burns so dim,
And you swear you don’t believe in him, God believes in you.*

*When you’re so ashamed that you could die,
And you can’t do right even though you try, God believes in you.
Blessed are the ones who grieve, the ones who mourn, the ones who bleed
In sorrow you sow, but in joy you’ll reap, God believes in you.*

We belong to each other and belong to our Lord – our deaths, our lives, and our rising.
Thanks be to God.