

ORDINARY SUNDAY 10

1 Kings 8:8-24; Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

What wonderful images we have in today's passages. We have prophets, raisings from the dead, a never-ending supply of food, onlookers being both amazed and terrified. It's the Easter story over and over – amazing and terrifying for the people of that day.

We, of course, can still be amazed, but we're not terrified any more. We know the Gospel passage probably by heart and we most likely know this wonderful passage about Elijah and the widow in Zarephath by heart, too. Stories of long ago, stories about an ancient people, stories from a time when miracles seem to have been taken more in stride than they are today – we might be tempted to think these stories don't have much to do with us. We certainly aren't able to raise the dead or provide through God's intervention a never-ending supply of grain and oil. So, we can be amazed and praise God, but we don't necessarily have to be motivated. Or do we?

We're kidding ourselves if we say that these are just inspirational stories. Jesus constantly reminded his followers that they were called to live as he lived. Actually, their Torah called them to live that way.

Jesus was only reminding them to be faithful to God's rule of life. It's the same for us. Our Baptismal covenant is a promise to live as Jesus did, to be a people of God.

So, let us look seriously at these stories to see what they have to say to us. There are several similarities between 1 Kings and the Luke passage. Both Elijah and Jesus are prophets. Both accounts centre on bringing a child back from death. The widow is provided with a never-ending supply of grain and oil, and we know that Jesus will supply God's people with a never-ending source of life in his own body and blood. Both stories show us that the ability to give life in various forms is proof that the person is a Godly person – sent by God. In both accounts there is an important connection between what Elijah and Jesus say and what happens.

Indeed in Luke's gospel especially there is always a connection between saying and doing. And it's often the connections that give us the "a-ha" moments that excite us.

Consider what the people say when Jesus gives the young man back to his mother: "God has looked favorably on his people." We hear those same words from Mary in the *Magnificat* and from Simeon in the *Nunc dimittis*. In our 1 Kings reading, Elijah tells the widow that the Lord God of Israel will not let her jar of meal go empty or jug of oil fail. God looks with favour. It's all through the Scriptures. God looks with favour, God looks with love, God looks with unfailing care on God's people, especially in the readings today, on the widows.

Now, isn't it interesting that we keep saying God looks with favour and God cares and God loves? Certainly there's no doubt that God does all these things, but look at how often God doesn't do it alone. Look at how often God uses God's people to bring the message of this love and care to others. Here's that connection again – a connection between heaven and earth.

Both Jesus and Elijah are a connection between God and God's people. Neither of them works what we consider a miracle for their own glory. Their actions glorify God. All who witness these miracles give glory to God and acknowledge that God works through these two men. "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth," the widow of Zarephath says. What a wonderful compliment.

And the people who witnessed Jesus bring the young man to life said, "A great prophet has risen among us!" Another great compliment! Wouldn't it be wonderful if people could say that about us? Wouldn't it be wonderful if people would see us being a connection between God and them?

The thing is – they should. One of the many lessons we might learn from both these Scripture passages is that what Jesus and Elijah did, we must do also. We'll probably not literally raise people from the dead, but we are called to be conduits of God's grace, and we are called to be prophetic.

Now, being prophetic doesn't mean that we have to be dramatic. We are prophetic when we are aware of the needs in the world around us and we speak the truth about it. The power of prophesy is in the truth of the words and the challenge those words offer people to change for the better.

But we also know that prophets often get in trouble. The Old Testament is full of stories about prophets being reviled, ignored, harassed – and sometimes killed. John the Baptist lost his head. Jesus was crucified. Certainly we're not supposed to be prophets like that are we?

The thing is – we are. Each one of us is called to speak God's word of truth in a difficult world. Each one of us – not just the people we see as modern-day day saints and the prophets of our time — the Deitrich Bonhoeffers and the Oscar Romeros,— Each one of us has our times to be prophetic.

In the biblical texts, prophets function as the vehicles of God's word: when they speak God's judgment on those who perpetrate injustice, they are announcing God's own critique of social, political, and economic injustices that bring about death, despair, and hopelessness.

When they offer alternate pictures of life as God intends it, prophets bring hope to the hopeless, and life to those shadowed by death and disaster. In short, prophets bring God's good news into bad times.

In today's reading Elijah offers us just such a picture of hope. Elijah is sent by God to prophesy against the injustices and the worship of Baal rather than God practised by King Ahab and his wife, the infamous Jezebel. His initial word to Ahab is that because of that King's evil ways, God will send a drought upon his kingdom that no amount of royal power can prevent or stop. Rain will come only when the God of Israel says so.

Elijah is called to speak God's truth to power – to speak and to live as example and warning of God's alternate reality while the powers that be in monarchical or temple leadership pursue other goals and achieve their ends by ungodly means

Then in the midst of the drought affecting King Ahab's world and people, God interrupts Elijah's life and sends him outside Ahab's jurisdiction. First Elijah is sent to the Transjordan, where he is protected and sustained by ravens, but as the drought spreads, he is sent northward up the coast to Zarephath in Sidon. Here, as God said, he finds a certain widow who will feed him. The word of God calls the prophet to go way beyond all the normal support systems of his life. As death, in the form of the drought, spreads, Elijah stays on the move until he comes to the widow. She is, by definition, lacking all the life-giving resources of ordinary patriarchal societies in the ancient world.

It is noteworthy also that God sends Elijah without any resources himself: he brings neither bread nor oil to the widow, nor does he bring well water. He has nothing to give away, it seems.

But through Elijah's faithful obedience, God's life-giving word assures the daily bread for the widow. And more than that; when the widow's son dies, and her hope for any sort of normal, ordinary future dies with him, the life-giving word of God renews the boy's life, and therefore hers too.

There is holy power at work in Elijah, as in all the prophets, the power of God's life-giving word to break through the death-dealing ways of nature and culture alike.

Perhaps the most important point of the whole story is that in rejecting and moving away from the worldview of King Ahab, and Queen Jezebel, and all the priests of the pagan gods who are turning the lives of God's people into a desert, the prophet brings unimagined and unimaginable hope into the parched lands because he brings the life-giving word of God.

Now I think that this has an incredible parallel for us in our lives in the twenty-first century — a time in which there is also often a great contrast between the values of the society in which we live and the values of God's kingdom.

Two weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost. And what we celebrated was that you and I have been assured of holy power at work in our own lives: the power of the Holy Spirit which allows us to live transformed and transformative lives.

But that is not all. Because when we look at today's gospel, as we watch Jesus, the living word of God, bringing life into another socioeconomic situation like that in the First Book of Kings, we receive an extra insight into what it means for us to be prophetic people.

Here is Jesus with a widow whose only son is dead. Our reading from the Gospel of Luke says: *"When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'"*

Now Nain was geographically very close to the site of Zaraphath. In fact it was probably built on the foundations of Zaraphath. So it is an apt place for an event in Jesus ministry which was very much the parallel of the well known story of Elijah. But there is a difference — an extra ingredient. It says that when Jesus saw the situation at Nain he had compassion for the widow

To have compassion, and to be moved by compassion, is to take the suffering of other persons into oneself. Elijah the prophet was so identified with the God of the life-bearing word that his own actions brought life in the midst of death. But Luke's Jesus embraces the suffering of people at the edge of the social fabric, on the margins of the power structures, and thus he identifies with the hopelessness of the widow.— just as he has identified with the hopelessness of the position of all humankind. That is why he died for us absorbing the pain of our separation from God removing our hopelessness and giving us new hope and new life through his resurrection.

In both the story of Elijah and in that of Jesus, hope that blazes forth in God's life-bringing and life-bearing presence, which transforms death-dealing situations into visions and experiences of life as God intends.

Life on the margins is brutal, nasty, and often much shorter than “three score years and ten.” The best-contrived social safety nets develop holes, and it does not take the eruptions of nature or the collapse in the global economy before people fall through them.

The pictures of Elijah and Jesus which are placed before us by today’s readings can illuminate our own death-dealing times, and prod us to live as Pentecost people called to embrace and bear life as God intends it. We have been empowered by the Spirit to live transformative lives, bearing compassion in deed as well as word, carrying the life of Christ, moved by the power of the Spirit amid the ways of our world.

So as we embark on the long months of ‘Ordinary Time’ in our liturgical calendar, let us do so in the prophetic spirit of seeking justice for all and seeing our world with compassionate eyes that we too may be agents of healing and of change. Amen.