

Sermon for 6 June 2010
2 Pentecost, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The parallels between this morning's Old Testament lesson and Gospel are striking. Here we have two stories of tragic death and resurrection, two stories in which the most glorious truth of our religion—namely, that God has power over death—is dramatically realized. But a careful reading of both passages suggests that there is even more going on here. We don't grasp the full story if we skip ahead to the happy ending prematurely. So, let's examine both scenes as they stood before God's miraculous intervention in each.

Elijah's sojourn in Zeraphath and Christ's in Nain are divided by nearly nine hundred years, yet in all that time, one reality remained a constant: it was very bad to be a widow and worse to be a childless widow. It is, of course, sad in any century to lose one's beloved. I, for one, cannot fathom the pain associated with such a loss. Even

so, life for a widow in the Western World in the 21st Century is not as potentially dire as it would have been in the Ancient Near East in either the 9th Century B.C., when Elijah was doing his thing, or in the 1st Century A.D. Today, after grieving the loss of a partner a widow (or widower for that matter) tends to have some options. In the Ancient World, on the other hand, losing one's husband usually resulted in absolute penury. In many cases, it ended up being a death sentence. Unless the deceased had a bachelor brother, which seems to be the case neither in the story from 1 Kings nor in Luke, the widow was unlikely to be able to remarry. She could not work for herself, for working women were not common in any but the artisan classes. Unless the widow had a son who could make a living and support her, she would likely have to beg or starve.

Each of the widows in our readings this morning had lost her only hope of survival. The widow of

Zerephath, as some of you will remember from your catechesis, was already hanging on to life by a thread. When Elijah had first come to her house he asked to be fed and she lamented her lack of grain, suggesting she had one meal's worth of food left and then she planned on starving to death. There was, indeed, a drought in the region at that time, and many others had died from lack of nourishment. Fortunately, God provided food for many days after the widow showed hospitality to Elijah, but there is no indication that she had been promised such a boon indefinitely. So, when her son died, not only did the inherent sadness of such a loss strike the widow, but almost certainly fear. She had lost not only her beloved son, but also the only means by which she could be supported in the long term.

Likewise, in the Gospel reading, Luke makes a point of noting that the dead man was the *only* son of a widow. Again, losing one's only child is tragic enough from an emotional and spiritual

perspective, but Luke likely highlights the fact because it also means penury and possible starvation for the widow of Nain.

These are dire circumstances, and those involved react as we should expect. The widow of Zeraphath is angry: angry at Elijah and angry at God. "What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God?" she protests. She is, in fact, blaming Elijah's presence (and in a sense God's presence) for the tragedy. Then Elijah himself makes an interesting move. "O Lord my God," he says, "hast thou brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" In this moment, Elijah, a prophet of God, accuses God himself of being arbitrary, unjust, and cruel. Shocking!

Even more shocking is Jesus' reaction to the plight of the widow of Nain, though you wouldn't know it reading our English translation. It says Jesus "had compassion" but his actual response was far stronger than what we would call compassion,

which tends to suggest a sort sweet sympathy. The emotion in which Jesus engages is far more powerful. What we have translated as "had compassion" is actually the funny sounding Greek verb *splagchnizomai*. It literally means "to be moved as to one's bowels" and it includes not only profound pity but also moral outrage.

Jesus doesn't just feel bad for the widow; he's furious. This is not the sweet, serene, Sunday School Savior we're accustomed to. He doesn't play pastoral theologian and say, "it's a hard situation, but it's God's will in a way we cannot yet understand." This is no time for puffy platitudes, and Jesus becomes indignant about the state of affairs. I preached last week about how the Trinity is about a relationship of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is nothing about a loving relationship which precludes anger, as those of you who are married may know.

So, here we have two tragic stories, two widows in the worst bind someone in their society could be in, and the widow of Zaraphath, and Elijah the prophet, and Jesus Christ himself *get mad*. They get mad at God. What can we learn from this?

Maybe we can learn that being angry at God isn't the worst thing we can do. Maybe we can still trust God in the depths of our souls, still love Him with all our hearts, and get away with being ticked off at him from time to time. As I said, a loving relationship does not preclude anger. God wants us to have a mature relationship with Him, and a mature relationship is going to go through periods of anger. If you've never ever been angry with a spouse or parent or child or friend then you're more even-tempered than I am, and I know I'm not especially a hothead. We can be angry, even if we're in the wrong on some issue in a conflict, precisely *because* we love the person with whom we're angry. God's not going to strike us down

because we're being peevish. He's not going to withhold His love because we question His wisdom.

Of course, in the end, all things do work out for those who trust God. The children were raised from the dead. We may eventually come to see God's love and grace in the midst of our own tragic circumstances. Even so, our souls are not in danger if, in the midst of terrible situations, we question God or get angry. It's not a lack of faith, but a reality of how we are as humans. The important thing is to maintain our relationship with God even when we're angry, to keep our conversation with him going. If we keep praying, the Holy Spirit will in time replace our anger with adoration, replace our questions with confidence, and at the last bring us to that heavenly country where the cares and occupations of this life with fade in the light of his most glorious presence.

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Amen.