

## Third Sunday in Pentecost

June 30, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**1 Kings 17:17-24** Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. **18** She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

**19** "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. **20** Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" **21** Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"

**22** The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. **23** Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"

**24** Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."

### "Hope amid Hopelessness"

It struck me a bit odd. Morbid even. But one time when I went to visit my grandparents, I saw my grandmother open up the local newspaper and immediately turn to the obituaries. 'At my age,' she told me, 'this is the biggest news for me each day.' Not especially cheerful, but probably true.

Have you ever read through an obituary? It always strikes me that there must be more to the story. You have the basic facts. The dates that provide the bookends for a person's life. Education. Marriage. Family. Work. Those who preceded the deceased. Those left behind. But there must be more to a person's life than just those bare facts. For each person sitting here there has to be at least one more thing too. Hope. We need that story to include hope. Sometimes we get a quick Bible verse or mention of a funeral service or inspirational quote in that obituary. But there is something better. There has to be. In First Kings chapter seventeen - one of the deepest, darkest tragedies recorded in the Bible - we get that hope. Amid grief, a response. But most of all we see our God who responds to the hopelessness we experience in this world. A God who gives us hope amid our hopelessness.

There must be more to the story of the widow in Zarephath. We don't know her name. We don't know anything about her except she had a son and she used to have a husband. She had been a victim of the drought and famine brought on by the idolatry of evil King Ahab and the unfaithfulness of the nation following him into the worship of the false god Baal. For some unexplainable reason God sent his MVP prophet outside the boundaries of Israel to her town. Miraculously God had provided for her and her son while she allowed Elijah to rent a room free of charge. Then, out of the blue, that precious child of hers who had been fed by God's supernatural provision falls ill and dies.

The other day while I was feeding the kids mac and cheese, the power went out. My immediate reaction was to check the circuit breakers to see if we had overloaded a circuit. That's what happens when things don't go the way we expect them to. We look for the most logical explanations. Why did this happen?

Why would God go to such lengths to keep the widow's son alive only to allow him to expire so unceremoniously? We can't help asking why. She can't help coming up with some possible explanations. God must be punishing her. She must be getting paid back for some serious infraction from her past. But one thing we can be sure of is her hurt. She is aware of her sin. She is plagued by guilt. She feels somehow responsible for her husband's death. She remembers all the things she didn't do. She could have been a better spouse. She didn't live up to everyone's expectations as a parent. She was never accepted by the people in her home town. She can't help feeling like God is punishing her with this family tragedy.

Out comes the anger. Out comes the hurt. She vents her broken heart against the easiest targets: God and his prophet.

According to some psychologists the children of addicts have very similar track records of self-destruction. It's an observation, not the result of strenuous research. There's no logical explanation for it. We just have these wounds. We have been hurt. We can bury them deep down inside after years of trauma. But eventually those wounds show themselves in how we act. The story of the widow of Zarephath helps us see how we deal with hopeless situations. We have anger. We come up with accusations. We need explanations.

There must be more to the story of Elijah. He just appears on the scene in Israel when the spiritual situation hits rock bottom. God used Elijah to deliver a powerful rebuke to King Ahab. Then Elijah retreats. God teaches him to trust in him to provide daily bread and constant protection. But now Elijah feels powerless. This widow goes beyond giving generous hospitality when she fed and lodged Elijah not knowing how long she would be able to feed her own family. Now her life, her joy, her hope is all gone with the death of her son.

She demands answers from Elijah. But there is more Elijah doesn't know than he knows. Elijah has more questions than answers than he can offer her. How can he possibly bring any good news to this hopeless situation? He's powerless to bring any positive results or share any good news. But where he turns and what he does is the key component to this entire encounter.

We know from experience when people are trying too hard to be helpful. They say things like 'it will all work out in the end,' or 'God's got a plan,' or 'just stay positive and look on the bright side.' They mean well. They are trying to make us feel better. But those words don't make any real changes or bring any significant result to change the hopelessness of the situation as we see it.

Psychology has all sorts of solutions for the basic problems we experience. We can adopt healthier habits. We can make sure we are getting enough sleep and being refreshed

mentally by exercise. We can talk to someone about what we're going through. Those are all helpful suggestions. But they only address the symptoms and don't get down to the real struggle. The best and brightest minds don't have real answers to the unavoidable tragedy of death.

For that we need the truth. To address life and death struggles we need the word from the LORD. The widow of Zarephath was able to come to that conclusion once this entire episode was resolved.

When my car breaks down, I could guess what's wrong with it. I could speculate what I think the problem is. But I would have about the same probability of guessing correctly as if I threw darts at a repair manual. So I take my car to someone who actually knows something about cars and how to fix them. When life breaks down, when we have questions without answers, we need the truth coming from the LORD.

Sin is the answer. At least the first part of the answer. Sin leaves our world broken. Sin leaves our bodies broken. Sin leaves us picking up the pieces from the brokenness we see all around us. Broken people demand answers from God when he provides none. Broken people stand speechless when asked to speak for God. Sin means every man, woman and child who has ever lived will face the brokenness of the end of life. It's a brokenness we are incapable of fixing and overcoming all on our own.

Elijah and the widow show us there is more to the story of our God than just sin and death. God has an answer to sin. God did more than just send prophets to serve as spokespersons throughout Israel's history. God did more than just parade out a progression of miracle workers one after the other. Those prophets were just warm up acts. The headliner was God's own Son.

Jesus came in human flesh to be the solution to the sin we can't overcome in our lives. Jesus is the answer to all the questions that confound us through earthly tragedies. God in the flesh is our ultimate hope. Jesus himself had to take on himself all our hurts and wounds. Jesus had to be pierced and crushed for our arrogant anger and hurtful accusations against God. Jesus took on himself all the burdens of all our failures to provide answers.

God in the flesh in the person of Jesus is the answer to all the why's we throw out in life. When Jesus went to the cross he experienced suffering beyond anything we will ever experience in this life. God's heart broke at the tragedy Jesus suffered on behalf of sinful humanity. God knows suffering. God feels your pain. But your God pushed through that pain and suffering with a purpose. You. He did it for you. Jesus went to that cross to give your life hope. Jesus came back from the grave to give you life. In Jesus we have hope amid life's worst hopelessness.

That gives you a different kind of hope beyond the normal, instinctual kinds of hope that fill your heart. When you cry out to God as Elijah did, keep in mind God may have something better for you than your best hopes. The best Elijah could do for that widow's son was buy him a few more years. Maybe a year or 20 or 50. But eventually even that miraculously

restored life would come to an end. The only way we can make sense of our short time on this earth, however much time God gives us, is to see it in the context of the life beyond this life. The reality of eternal life helps us face the reality of death. Whatever happens during my lifetime, whether a long and full life or a tragically short life filled with more than my share of hardships, God lets me share the certainty of the Apostle Paul. He knew that being with Christ is better by far than anything this life has to offer. (Philippians 1:23)

CS Lewis once said: "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither." (CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 134) He meant there is more to life than this life. If our hopes for life are filled with thoughts of an easier, stress-free, painless existence, we will always end up disappointed. If we see all our desires in life as a signal that God had designed us for something more, something bigger, it will put things in perspective. We will keep in mind the bigger picture of all eternity and enjoy all the things God gives us along the way.

The cross of Jesus stays in the forefront of our minds as Christians. It is a constant reminder to stay away from guess work and speculation and endless opinions about God's why and God's when. The cross is an ever present reminder of how God operates opposite our human logic in this world. The cross provides hope in the middle of despair. The cross is there for the people of God as we deal with the questions and accusations of people far from God. People who don't have hope in God are looking for real hope instead of the sugary sweet sentiments of greeting cards they so often get. We can stop and acknowledge actual suffering and real pain in their lives. Jesus is real and present in this pain. We get to take hurting people to the cross of Christ to give them the real hope they won't find anywhere else. Jesus is there with us so we can connect with people around us who need hope, who need power, who need what only a God in the flesh can give to our world. Jesus meets us in our own vulnerability so we can bring Jesus to people in their own brokenness.

In a world looking for answers, we know there is more to the story. In a world of people struggling with grief and guilt, there is hope. The resurrected Jesus is the more we need for every tragic story. His life rewrites every one of our obituaries. His life brings the light of life to the darkest moments. Jesus is your hope amid hopelessness. Amen.