

**Sermon for FPC Gardena –Sunday June 6 , 2010**  
*1 Kings 17:8-24 & Luke 7:11-17*

Today's Old and New Testament passages have much in common with one another. They both tell stories about widows, both of whom lost sons to death, and both sons were restored to life through miracles of God. From what we know about the culture in that time, the only hope a widow had for support was through a son. So, in both of these instances, these mothers were restored to life along with their sons. Both stories serve to point to the power of God over matters of life and death.

But there are several differences between these two events as well. We certainly know more of the story surrounding the Widow of Zarephath—the famine, the visit from Elijah, his request for water and a morsel of bread, her generosity, the miracle of the scant amounts of oil and meal lasting long enough to see them through the drought. We see that Elijah remained with this little family through the drought, and came to know them and care for them. When the widow's son dies, we are privy to the many emotions that swirled through that household—grief, anger, fear, hope—as well as Elijah's impassioned plea to God to restore the life of the boy. And as his life is restored, the widow's faith in God takes root and begins to flourish.

**The details of the events at that little household in Zarephath stand in stark contrast to the story of the events that Luke describes in Nain. Nain was about three walking hours southeast of Nazareth. The city of Nain was approached by a steep ascent with burial caves on each side of the road. Suffice to say, it was well off the beaten path. It so happened that Jesus and his disciples were traveling there, accompanied by a large crowd of followers. Their group just happened upon the funeral procession of this son of the Widow of Nain. Jesus and the widow did not know one another, nor did Jesus know the son. This was a chance encounter along a seldom-traveled road.**

**At the point of the encounter, the young man was already dead, his bier being carried through the steep roads of Nain toward the burial caves. Along with his mother and various neighbors, this group was accompanied by a band of professional mourners—a common practice of the time—who wept and wailed loudly to symbolize the collective grief surrounding the death.**

**Perhaps the greatest contrast to the events in Zarephath, is that this widow did not ask for her son to be restored, she didn't even know that such a request was possible. We know nothing of her faith, or even if she had any.**

**As the band of mourners met up with Jesus and his crowd of followers, it was as if life and death converged on that mountainside. One group represented loss and grief, the other healing and hope. It was Jesus' compassion for the grieving mother that served as the catalyst for his actions and the resulting events. And it is this compassionate action on the part of Jesus that, I believe, is the most important and powerful message that comes from today's lectionary passages. And it is a message that needs to be heard and understood, first and foremost, by Christian people, because it offers significant information for the way we understand our God.**

**Both of today's passages underscore the inevitable presence of death in the midst of life. Each one provides insight into human reactions to death—including grief, ritual, attention to the body of the deceased, as well as comfort for the bereaved. In some form or another, all of these are part of our human responses to death today. Even a well-lived life of over ninety-nine years, like that of John Wooden, strikes a chord of grief within our hearts. Death at any age or stage means that someone is no longer present in our world, our lives. But when a child dies before a parent, as in today's passages, there is an additional measure of pain and grief, a sense that the natural order of things has been circumvented.**

**Even when death comes as a blessing—following a long and painful illness, there is grief—for the life that might have been. It is not wrong to grieve—it is a necessary and natural human emotion in the face of loss and death. Jesus, in his time on earth, experienced grief and expressed compassion for friends and strangers alike. His emotions and actions in Nain are a prime example of this.**

**From the time of creation, the tree of life has grown and the river of life has flowed onward, God’s people have lived and died, and we grieve our losses. As we noted earlier, we experience all sorts of emotions in our grief, including anger, sorrow, fear, and hope. But the Widow of Zarephath exhibits another fairly common manifestation of grief—which is blame. Remember that when Elijah came into the lives of the widow and her son, they were in the midst of a terrible famine, and expected to die very soon. It was the miracle brought about by God, through Elijah, that extended their supplies and their lives. Yet when the widow’s son becomes ill and dies, her immediate response is to turn on Elijah, blaming him for bringing death upon her son. He who had already restored their lives was suddenly the object of blame. Yet Elijah turns to God in prayer, asking for – and receiving – compassion and restoration of life for the widow’s son. We may think this is awful behavior on the part of the widow...**

**yet are we not guilty of the very same thing? Do we not thank God for the good that comes our way, and yet blame God for the bad? How—we ask—how can a loving God allow people to suffer such agony, such pain, and then let them die?**

**Take another look at these two biblical widows and their sons. God did not cause either of their deaths. Certainly these two sons died sooner than might have been expected, but that was neither God’s choice nor God’s doing. Elijah, prophet, servant of God, cried out to God in painful prayer at the death of the boy in Zarephath, and God compassionately restored his life. Jesus, just passing through Nain, empathized with the widow there, touched the bier, and raised the young man to new life. Neither of these healings or resurrections are the actions of a God—or agents of a God—who doesn’t care, or who causes death. These two events make it very clear that our God is a loving and compassionate God.**

**Quite frequently, I hear people ask—“How can a loving God allow my—friend, spouse, child, parent, neighbor—to suffer so, to die like this?” I truly believe, my friends, that our God suffers with us in such times and circumstances. God created each and every one of these beloved people—and if they are beloved to us, are they not even more beloved to God? God does not create people in order to harm or destroy them, but to give them life abundant and eternal.      Page 5**

**In the Psalms, we read of God turning sorrow into joy, mourning into dancing.**

**Throughout the gospels, Jesus promises the gift of new life. In Revelation, we read descriptions of the heavenly community where all life is renewed and restored.**

**As Christians, we affirm our belief that death does not have the final answer.**

**The most quoted, memorized, and beloved passages in our New Testament state that, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16 describes a God who loves the entire world—and all of its people, a God who does not condemn people to death, but rather restores them to new and everlasting life.**

**Along with the common sentiments of blaming God for the presence of illness, suffering, and death in the world, come ideas fashioned out of bits and pieces of scripture which suggest to some that not all people are welcome in the community of heaven. Many Christians work and worry in fear that those who have not been ‘saved’ or who have not acknowledged Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior face a future of eternal hellfire following their deaths. One passage which some denominations use to feed this fear is found in the fourteenth chapter of John’s gospel, where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”**

**There is danger in interpreting this in too narrow a way—the danger of exclusion in the name of Christ. I believe that the Risen Christ takes many forms, and that the Holy Spirit is at work in our pasts, presents, and futures. I believe that God’s love and forgiveness is so broad, so deep, so high, so powerful that there is no one outside the reach of God’s grace.**

**Let’s take one last look at the Widow of Nain and her son. They were strangers to Jesus. The young man was already dead—his body being carried to its burial place. No statements of faith were uttered. Yet Jesus had compassion for the mother, he reached out and touched the bier, and asked the young man to rise. Life was restored.**

**If God had caused or desired the death of this young man, then he would have remained dead.**

**As one who had not received Jesus in life, after death should it have followed that this young man would have already been consigned to hell?**

**Yet, at Jesus’ intervention, the young man—and his mother—lived again.**

**And, eventually, he would die again, as would the boy from Zarephath, as well as both their mothers, as well as Jesus. Death is part of life, and that is not about to change. But there is a purpose in the sharing of these two biblical events. Page 7**

**As human beings in this earthly life, we cannot see the resurrection life beyond.**

**And so God has chosen to give us some glimpses of what is possible in the face of death—through the families in Zarephath and Nain, through the resurrection of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus. These miracles took place in plain sight of humanity. Does this mean that, just because we cannot see them, miracles do not take place after death? Of course not. That is what faith is all about.**

**God's prophets, like Elijah, and God's own Son, Jesus showed us the immensity of God's compassionate love for all people. We have been shown miracles of restoration and resurrection in this life so that we may know with certainty that there will be many more in the next life.**

**Even as we grieve the deaths and losses around us, let us not fear the consequences of the transition from this life to the next. For in both places, we are surrounded by God's compassion and Christ's love.**

**As we gather around the table today, we meet in faith with those who have gone on before us into the heavenly community. As we share the gifts of God, let us rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.**

## **1 Kings 17:8-24**

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” But she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.” She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah. After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” But he said to her, “Give me your son.” He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” So 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 truth.”

## **Luke 7:11-17**

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.