

This is an ordinary sermon for our beginning of Ordinary Time. That's another name for the Sundays after Pentecost. They aren't part of the Easter cycle, and they aren't part of the Christmas cycle, so they are ordinary Sundays. Feast days are glorious and joyful but sometimes it's nice to just have some ordinary time. God doesn't just come in the extremes of our lives the mountain top experiences, or the dark valleys, but God meets us in the ordinary events and times too. Not that the events we heard about in our readings are ordinary.

We have two stories of widows this morning with a quite extra-ordinary and devastating problem. They both have not only lost their husbands, but they have now lost their sons. This tragedy for each of these women will mean that they are helpless in a society that does not normally recognize independent women.

But before I talk about the widows and their sons, I want to talk a little about Elijah and the time in which he lived. Elijah is kind of an enigma. We've heard his name mentioned, sometimes in conjunction with Jesus' name, but most of us don't really know much about him. So, over the next Sundays of June we're going to spend a little time getting to know this odd guy who is God's prophet.

Our story today about Elijah and the widow really begins at the beginning of Chapter 17 in the first Book of Kings. Now the first thing we want to understand in order to know Elijah is we need to know a little about the time in which he lived. Elijah did his prophesying in the Northern Kingdom.

Solomon was King David's son you may remember. He's the one who built the Temple in Jerusalem. Everything held together while Solomon was alive, but after Solomon died, trouble broke out. In very round numbers this all happened around 900 BCE. Solomon's son was Rehoboam and he was the heir to the throne in Jerusalem. But revolt broke out because of a practice of forced labor and taxation begun by Solomon that was very oppressive.

Now, Jeroboam had been in charge of some of the forced labor, and he then led the rebellion against the heir to the throne, Rehoboam. He joined forces with the tribes of the north, and they seceded altogether. They held their own crowning of their own King, Jeroboam, in the town of Shechem.

The capital of the north was eventually moved to the city of Samaria and became the capital of the Northern Kingdom which was called Israel. The Southern kingdom became known as Judah, and their capital was Jerusalem, where the Temple was.

The two kingdoms stayed separated until finally both of the kingdoms were conquered by others. The first to reach its demise was the Northern Kingdom which was conquered by the Assyrians and the inhabitants taken away into slavery in around 700 BCE. Never again would the 12 tribes of Israel work together to fight their common enemies, and, you know, that may have been a factor in the eventual downfall of both kingdoms. "Divide and conquer", they say.

Now the reason I wanted to go into some of this history is because over the course of our next few weeks this will shed light on Elijah's job description as God's prophet. We have no burning bush scene with Elijah. We aren't told how Elijah came to realize that God had a job for him to do. The Book of Kings just quietly introduces Elijah as Ahab became king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom in around 870 BCE. He's that guy with the famous wife named Jezebel.

God has called Elijah to tell Ahab that he should not be worshipping false gods – the Baals, as they are called. God declared that there would be a famine (God does that quite a bit in the Hebrew Scriptures) and told Elijah to leave Judah and go east and he would be taken care of by ravens at the Wadi Cherith.

This needlepoint which I'll leave hanging in the hallway for a while is about 100 years old. It is a depiction of Elijah being fed by the ravens at the Wadi Cherith. Wadi, by the way, means stream, an ephemeral stream specifically. Out in the West we'd call it an arroyo.

Our story today starts when Elijah is still at the Wadi, but it has dried up. God commands him to go to Zarephath which is all the way over on the coastline near Sidon. God is taking care of Elijah by sending him to a widow who will feed him. The only problem is that she has no food. But God provides for them all.

Then the unthinkable happens. The widow's only son dies. It doesn't make any sense. Why would God save them from starvation only to take the widow's son by illness. The widow asks Elijah, "What kind of a man of God are you, anyway?" Keep in mind that the people of that day thought that everything that happened was God's doing. Everything. The weather, the harvest, births and deaths. There was no such thing for them of the forces of nature; science and medicine apart from God's will.

Elijah pleads with God and after lying on the boy, which was a regular medical practice of that time, the child came back to him. (That method may have worked well in the case of hypothermia. Maybe that's how it came into practice.) So then the relieved and happy Elijah gave the boy to his mother.

So, now we turn to our Gospel passage for today, a story that Luke tells about Jesus going to a town called Nain. You'll find it on your map near Nazareth. We're told that Jesus had a large crowd following him into the city that day. And at the same time there was a funeral procession leaving the city. This creates a collision of sorts. Custom would dictate that Jesus and his people would quietly stand aside and let the procession pass in a respectful way. Just the way when we see a line of cars in a funeral procession, we let them pass, or make their turn or whatever, without hindering them.

But what does Jesus do? He doesn't quietly stand aside. He goes up to the widow, and tells her not to weep. That seems a bit harsh, doesn't it. This poor woman has already lost her husband, and now she has lost her only son. It is not only an emotional tragedy for her, but an economic catastrophe. She will now have to depend on the generosity of others in order to survive.

Jesus not only stops her procession and goes to speak to her. He then proceeds to go over to the bier and touch the pallet on which the dead son is laid out. Jesus, a good Jew remember, will now be ritually unclean until sunset by having touched the bier of the dead boy. Jesus does not allow the opportunity that has presented itself to pass by like a quiet, sad funeral procession. He seizes the moment to do something with what has been put in his path.

Through his touch Jesus miraculously brings the boy back to life and then Luke reports that Jesus gave him to his mother. Those are the exact words used in the story about Elijah and the boy that he raised from the dead.

What are we to make of all this, and how is it helpful to us? Luke remembers the important ancient story of Elijah and tells the story about Jesus in a similar way. Luke wants the people who read his Gospel to connect the two stories and remember that story about Elijah. Why?

Because it is further evidence that God keeps on being involved in the lives of the people in 900 BCE and in 30 CE. The good news here is that God through the Holy Spirit keeps on being involved in our lives in the year 2010. And we keep being reminded that it is the same Spirit when we hear familiar words that recall an old story. Old stories help us make new stories.

Let me use an example about the effect of an old story on us. Here's a song that maybe you remember, maybe your parents taught you. It was written in 1943 and it may help you recall a different time in your life. And for many of us, this has been passed down through oral tradition, just as were the stories about Elijah. "Mairzy doats....

Remember that song? Remember how you learned it? Did it bring back memories for you of when you first heard it or were taught it? This is the kind of thing that is passed down through the years. And the same is true with miracle stories too. Maybe your family has a miracle story that is passed down through generations. Someone got better from a deadly illness who wasn't expected to do so. Someone survived a car crash that seemed impossible to survive.

I've told you before, and it bears repeating when we start feeling unsure about how to take the miracle stories that we read in the Bible. Miracles are interpreted events. Each of us can see an event one way, and another person interprets it another way. What one person would call a simple case of modern medicine, or logical consequences, another would say is miraculous.

Don't let these miracle stories put you off just because you are an intelligent, scientifically minded person. Miracles surround us all the time. We are alive. We breathe, and our hearts pump blood without even the slightest conscious effort. I consider that a miracle. And we each might bring about a miracle today by the simple act of touch. Elijah and Jesus touched the unthinkable – the dead - and look what it did. What will happen if we touch someone who is alive!