

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

YOUR SON IS ALIVE!

1 Kings 17:17-24

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5)

Analysis by Paul Jaster

17After 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. 18She 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!" 19But 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. 20He 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?" 21Then 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." 22The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23Elijah 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." 24So 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."

DIAGNOSIS: Our Doubts

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): A Slap in the Face
A Slap in the Face, Salt in the Wound, a Knife in the Back, a Raw Deal, a Kick in the Gut—this is what the faithful feel whenever God allows an innocent child to die. It opens up that old, persistent, aching wound: "Why Does God Allow Bad Things to

Happen to Good People?" Certainly the widow of Zeraphath passed the "faith test." Although she lived deep in the heart of Baal country and although at first she operated with a resigned fatalism ("I'm going home and preparing my last few drops of oil and handful of meal so that we may eat it, and die"), she did God's word immediately and ungrudgingly.

She fed this "man of God" (Elijah) first, just as he asked...without any hesitation. And over "many days," she joyfully discovered that her "jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that God spoke by Elijah." She acted on Elijah's word with unquestioning obedience, and God kept God's word. Yet, despite her honest goodness and faithfulness, her innocent son died. What a slap in the face! No wonder she cries "foul" in a loud and bitter lament.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): A Bitter Ambiguity

Events like this leave the obedient and faithful torn and uncertain. Is the presence of a man of God a blessing or a curse? "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son." That is an accusation, not a question. The woman blamed Elijah. In her book, the presence of Elijah drew God's attention to her so that her general sinfulness registered on the divine consciousness. And even Elijah, a man of God, was puzzled and distressed, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?"

That's not much of a question either, but a finger-pointing lament. Elijah blamed God for murder. Apart from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ there is no certainty, only "ambiguity," which literally means "both ways." The two ways of the law. The stick and the carrot. Retribution or

reward. Sin brought to remembrance or sin overlooked. God against me or God for me. Who knows when you are dealing with the law and the law alone? The trinity of Judge/Jury/Executioner can seem quite fickle.

The woman thought the death of her innocent son was a punishment for her sin in general. Elijah saw the death of her son as undeserved, embarrassing, and inhospitable. When bad things happen to good people, there comes this deep doubt, an unresolved ambiguity: Is God for me or against me? Unresolved ambiguity leads to doubt. The idea that God is "near" and "close at hand" is not necessarily a good thing if God is bringing judgment and reward, and not grace.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): A Great Calamity
An innocent son is dead. And God is to blame. How odd of God to save a life "for many days" only to take it again in the end? However, deep in the heart of Baal country, this boy's death is part of a greater contest, and God has a higher purpose in it. A high-level duel going on: Yahweh vs. Baal (and all other fertility religions). Who sends rain, controls food, and brings dead things to life again? It is Yahweh, and not Baal, who can bring blessing or a curse.

But hardly can that witness be made without there being times of draught, famine, death in the first place. The death of this innocent boy is a key part in a larger story. Who is potent, and who is impotent? Yahweh brings both life and death. At stake is nothing less than the "glory" of God. As Jesus might say of this death echoing John 9:3, "Neither this boy or his parents sinned; he died so that God's works might be revealed in him." God's work of reversing the consequence of us going on the wrong path and trusting (or distrusting) in the wrong way. On the cross Jesus came under the power of that death whose ultimate author is God. But by our Lord's resurrection and the giving of the

Spirit, Jesus proclaims that his Father, the God of the Holy Scriptures (Yahweh), wants to give life to all. There is no doubt or ambiguity about it.

PROGNOSIS: God's Certainties

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Your Son is Alive! The resuscitation of this innocent son is yet another bit of proof that it is Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, who has the power to take a life and give it back again. It would happen again in Jesus. An innocent son would die for God's greater purposes. God's own son. And God is not so much to blame, as God is to credit. Elijah took the son from his mother's bosom, carried him up to the upper chamber where he was lodging. He stretched upon the child three times and cried out to the Lord. And the Lord listened. The life of the child came into him again, and he revived.

Something even grander would happen to Jesus and us. He was in the tomb three days and then was raised. Not "revived" to die again another day, but "raised." His was a resurrection. And he was not just a "man of God," but "God himself" in human flesh and blood. And his "upper room" is the very heights of heaven itself. This miracle takes place in private. It's God's answer to our prayers, not magic. God is in charge and is ultimately on the side of life. Through the ministry of Jesus and those who follow him, the God and Father of us all offers life in the midst of death by providing food and water, healing the sick, and raising the dead. A resurrection, too. That's where we are headed.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): No Doubt about It—Jesus Is the Way, the Truth and the Life

There is no ambiguity here. There is only the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. A living son is given to you.

God's own. "See, your child is alive!" we could say to God, just as Elijah said to the widow. Like Elijah, Jesus is an agent of God's power. And so impressed with the widow of Zeraphath was he, that Jesus used this event as a model for his own universal ministry and for raising the son of the widow of Nain and healing the daughter of the Syrophenician woman. The God we know through Jesus has compassion for all people. We do not need to fear, for Jesus echoes those words from Elijah, too, "Do not be afraid" (v. 13).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): A Bold Confession

The widow moves from anger and a disappointed hostility to a bold, two-fold confession of faith, even bolder than before. "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth," the astonished woman exclaims. Elijah is indeed a man with divine power, and he really speaks the truth. The same can be said of Jesus. He is indeed a person with divine power, and he really speaks the truth. And the truth is that God's powerful word is still alive today...in God's mouth and ours. We are called to give a bold confession of our faith, even when the times are desperate and the path unsure. As old Doc Caemmerer would often say, "Do not preach your doubts. Preach God's certainties."