

## *The Prophet of Compassion*

**1 Kings 17:17** 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.<sup>18</sup> 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!"<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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?"<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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** Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep."<sup>14</sup> Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"<sup>15</sup> The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.<sup>16</sup> 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!"<sup>17</sup> This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

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You may remember that several weeks ago we looked at a passage back in the fourth chapter of Luke where Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. At first, things were going pretty well. But the crowd got angry with Jesus when he reminded them that God chose to bless people who weren't part of the chosen people and he mentioned Naaman the Syrian and a widow in Zarephath.

Today's text from First Kings is about that widow in Zarephath. There was a great drought in the land of Israel and Elijah the prophet was sent by God up to Phoenicia, to Zarephath, a town on the coast. As he was about to enter the city gates, Elijah met a widow and he rented a room from her. Our reading today picks up the story at the point where the widow's son becomes ill and dies. Elijah takes the boy, prays over him, and the boy's life is restored. Then Elijah gives the son to his mother.

Notice all of the parallel points with today's text about Jesus as he comes to Nain. Like Elijah, just as he comes to the city gates, he meets a widow. Just like the story about Elijah, the widow has a son who dies. Like Elijah, Jesus revives the son and both texts use the same phrase, "he gave him to his mother." Was the crowd around Jesus impressed by a dead man being revived? Absolutely! But they also took note of all of the parallels between what they had just witnessed and what Elijah had done in Zarephath. Just as Elijah was one of the great prophets, so now the crowd declared, "A great prophet has risen among us!"

I wish there was some way to break the association in our minds between the words *prophecy* and *prediction*. Jesus hasn't predicted anything here in this text, but the crowd recognizes him as a prophet. Back in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus referred to himself as a prophet, saying, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," but he makes no predictions on that occasion. Later, in Luke chapter 13, Jesus again referred to himself as a prophet. A person was a prophet, not because they predicted the future, but because they brought God's word to the people. They preached. They proclaimed. They acted out God's message in word and deed – and it often wasn't a message that people wanted to hear. On the road to Emmaus, the disciples said that Jesus "was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." They don't declare that Jesus was a prophet because he made predictions that came to pass, but because he was mighty in deed and word before God.

It's interesting to note how often the Old Testament prophets begin by stating, "Hear now the word of the Lord." or "Thus says the Lord." The prophets were messengers, delivering God's word to the people.

And do you hear a subtle difference between saying that Jesus fulfilled predictions - and saying that Jesus fulfilled the teaching of the Old Testament prophets? Fulfilling the teachings is a much broader task. It says something about how Jesus lived his life.

One of the many things I like about Thomasville is the way that funeral processions are treated here. Just like when I was a boy in South Texas, people pull over to the side of the road and stop out of respect. Men, who wouldn't even think to remove their "grimy cap" while they eat at the diner, take off their hat as the funeral procession passes by. Notice what Jesus does in today's passage from Luke. Most people would stand respectfully beside the road as the funeral procession passed by. But "Jesus sees people as God sees them and responds to them as God responds to us."<sup>i</sup>

His attention was focused on the widow, not the dead man. A widow without a son to inherit his father's property was in a helpless situation. Without an heir, all of her deceased husband's personal property would go back to his family, leaving her without any resources. Jesus acted without drama, without ritual, and even without prayer. Rather than standing passively at the side of the road as the funeral procession passes by, Jesus went over to touch the stretcher on which the body was being carried, violating the law of cleanliness as found in Numbers 19:16. Anyone who touched a corpse or even a grave was unclean for seven days. But Jesus frequently ignored the rules regarding ritual cleanliness, touching lepers and letting sinful women wash his feet.

On top of that, it surely seems rather insensitive for Jesus to tell the widow, "Do not weep." It's hard to imagine many things that are harder to go through than burying your own child, complicated in this case because it may well leave her destitute. So what is Jesus doing here? He is, it turns out, fulfilling the prophesy of the prophets; he is fulfilling the preaching of the prophets. The prophet Zechariah proclaimed, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another;<sup>10</sup> do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor." The Prophet Jeremiah taught, "<sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place . . . <sup>7</sup> then I will dwell with you in this place." Over and over again, in the Law of Moses and in God's message delivered by the prophets, the teaching was that the powerless and the poor, as exemplified by the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, were to be cared for with love and tenderness. And Jesus was about to fulfill the law and the prophets with this widow.

The text says that Jesus was moved with compassion for this woman. He didn't ask her if she would like to have her son back. He didn't ask her if she believed in him. It's a distortion of Christ's message and his life to tell people that they will be healed "if they just have enough faith." Jesus didn't require faith, although he was pleased when he found it. But this widow made no request. She didn't profess any faith in Jesus. Rather, Jesus stepped forward to meet her need and comfort her sorrow.

Jesus was moved with compassion. Compassion means literally to "together-suffer." It's sorrow for the troubles of another with the urge to help; it's pity, deep sympathy, and empathy. In this passage, Jesus teaches us by his actions what a life of compassion means. On other occasions he taught with parables about compassion. Luke relates a story that Jesus told about a Samaritan who was traveling up to Jerusalem from Jericho. He saw a man who had been beaten and robbed and left for dead on the road. In fact, perhaps he was dead. But the Samaritan was moved by compassion and cared for the man, took him to an inn, and paid for his treatment.

Luke tells of another teaching of Jesus, the story of the prodigal son. Here again, compassion is the main theme, as the father ran out to greet his returning son, showering him with blessings before the son could offer a single word of contrition or regret. So, we see that Jesus is a prophet, one who delivers God's word to the people, and that a major theme of this message is the theme of compassion, shown both in the spoken lessons of Christ and in the lived lessons of Christ's life. Jesus is a prophet of compassion, a prophet of God's word, bringing among other words, a word of compassion.

Where does that intersect with our lives today? How can we live lives that fulfill Christ's teaching about compassion? There was no planning on my part to preach on this text the same weekend that included our monthly movie night. Some of you were here last night as we watched the movie, *The Blind Side*. It's the true story of a Christian family in Memphis, Tennessee, and their relationship with a teenaged boy, an orphan for all practical purposes, who has grown up in poverty and neglect in the projects. It'd be easy for a

prosperous family to sit in an upscale home - and write checks for worthy causes. It'd be easy to attend charity balls - wearing gowns that cost more than the donation being made to attend. It'd be easy to pay \$ 250 for a plate of rubber chicken, a boring speech, and your picture in the paper.

Leigh Anne Touhy was a bit more hands-on than that. She and her family literally took Michael off the street one night and gave him a warm place to sleep. Michael didn't beg or ask. The Touhys saw need, had compassion, and took risks. Michael found a family and a home and found himself. The Touhy family found where their Christian faith met reality. You see, Christian faith, real faith, real trust, can lead you to do things that are a radical departure from the culture you live in, can cause you to leave common sense behind and trust God, can lead you to take risks because it's the right thing to do. The Touhy family walked the path where Christ had walked before them. They took the journey into compassion.

On that path, they learned lots of things. They learned how privileged they were. They learned not to take things for granted. They learned what being family really means. A friend told Leigh Anne, "You're changing that boy's life." Leigh Anne replied, "No, he's changing mine." Walking the journey of faith, following in the footsteps of Jesus will do that. Living a life of compassion will not only change the lives of those you help; it will change your life, as well. Amen.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Acts 3:22** Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you.'

<sup>NRS</sup> **Acts 7:35** "It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.<sup>36</sup> He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years.<sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.'

<sup>NRS</sup> **Deuteronomy 18:18** I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 13:33** Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 24:19** He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

<sup>NRS</sup> **Zechariah 7:8** The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying:<sup>9</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another;<sup>10</sup> do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

**Jeremiah 7:5** For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,<sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,<sup>7</sup> then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 10:33** But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 15:20** So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 1:41** Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 6:34** As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 8:2** "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 9:23** Jesus said to him, "If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes."

<sup>NRS</sup> **James 1:27** Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

<sup>i</sup> Verlee A. Copeland, *Feasting on the Word, year C, vol 3* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 119