

MIRACLES ?

(First Kings 17:17-24.; Luke 7:11-17)

Prepared for First Presbyterian Church, Thomasville, NC, June 6, 2010

Miracles....Do they still happen? O, yes, I know there's the amazing remission of the cancer that the doctors thought was hopeless, and where they could find no scientific explanation for the unexpected improvement of the patient. Yes, I know that, in a sense, every delivery of a healthy baby at Thomasville Medical Center is nothing short of a miracle. And the achievement of recovery for an alcoholic is surely no less a miracle than when Jesus turned water into wine at Cana in Galilee.

But after reading these stories from First Kings and Luke's Gospel, you know I'm asking a different kind of question. You know I'm thinking of these incredible happenings for the better in these Bible stories that defy explanation—the jar of meal and the jug of olive oil that just didn't run out, when there kept on being enough, even when it was almost gone. ...Elijah raising a little boy back to life after he'd died from some terrible fever or infection. ...Jesus reaching out to the poor widow at Nain, bringing her dead only son back to life, and with him her hope that she'd be cared for, not abandoned in old age.

Nowadays, since God has given us science and technology, nuclear energy and digital communication to do things for us that—just a hundred years ago—would have been called “miracles”,...If God is promoting us into a century when more and more of God's miraculous gifts are called “wonder drugs”, and are available at CVS or Walgreen's...If God has allowed us to push the frontiers of the unknown so far back that there's really the possibility we could find the cure for Cancer in our time, and eliminate hunger through genetically engineered foods...Then what is the point of reading these ancient stories of Jesus' miracles from 2,000 years ago, and the wonders told about Elijah and Elisha 800 years before that?

And yet, they are part of the Bible, that we look upon as somehow being a message from God. So I found myself this week asking questions of these old stories—stories of Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath, of Jesus and the Widow at Nain. And I hoped you would join me in the conversation.

Even with **Kindle** and **eReader** competing to put the Public Library on the junk pile, along with dial telephones and paper pocket calendars. You can still fill a fine Sunday afternoon reading (from print!) the 2,800-year-old stories of Elijah, the Hebrew prophet who faced-down King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, maybe the most corrupt regime the Jews ever had to suffer under. And when you start back at the beginning of First Kings, Chapter 17, you realize that, by the time of the episode we read this morning—the raising of the Widow's son at Zarephath, you're into the third of three stories about miraculous ways God saved Elijah from starvation and from the hit squad sicked on him by the royal couple. Speaking for God, Elijah has told everyone—including the King!—there'll be a really bad, three-year drought. But while things are getting worse and worse, God has this crazy plan to save Elijah, telling him to go camp out in a desert creek-bed, and sending food to him by friendly ravens every day ...That is, until things get so bad the creek dries up and Ravens can't find a scrap to bring Elijah for even that survival menu of bread and beef jerky. By the time Elijah takes up boarding with the poor widow and her son, this is already “Chapter Two” in ***The Trials and Troubles of Elijah***.

Right there, there's a peculiar twist in the story: God directs Elijah to go seek shelter with a widow at "Zarephath in Sidon". You'd miss it, except for the words "in Sidon". You won't find Sidon on modern maps of the Eastern Mediterranean; but you will find its modern name—"Lebanon". What's odd about that? Just that for Elijah, a faithful Jew and a Jewish prophet, Sidon is a foreign country, a land of enemies of Israel—the dreaded Philistines! And here is God saying to Elijah, "You go there, into the heart of enemy territory—that's where I'll shelter you." It's as though God said to you, "Oh, you're worn out with the economic crunch of the past three years, unemployment, insecurity? Well, go spend a restful two week vacation in beautiful Kabul, Afghanistan!" So odd it is that, 800 years later, when Jesus was shunned and criticized for his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, he says, ***"There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when...there was a severe famine over all the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon."***

And so my questions begin: What are these stories about? *These stories—feeding by the ravens, sheltering with a widowed woman in enemy territory, even raising her son—an enemy's child!—to life again...are these stories about preserving Elijah's life, so that he can later speak the truth to powerful people—King Ahaz and Queen Jezebel?* Yes, surely so! God's great sacred story, leading to the birth of Jesus the Savior of all, features Elijah so centrally that in his Transfiguration the disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah! Surely this was about saving Elijah for his crucial role in what is now our history!

And yet as the stories weave each one into the next, I wondered, ***Is this about saving the widow and her son?*** At the heart of the scene where Elijah meets the widow, he asks her for a drink of water and a piece of bread, which leads her to lament that she's down to her last cup of meal and her last three tablespoons of olive oil.... Which in turn leads to Elijah's confident promise that, if she'll include him in her little struggling family circle, there will always be enough meal in the jar, enough oil in the jug—and, wonder of wonders, there is! Is that what this is all about—having faith and making it through a life-threatening crisis that would have been a death sentence by starvation? Yes, surely that, too.

But that's not the end of the story! For the widow's little son falls deathly sick and dies. And in the three-hanky climax, Elijah begs God to restore the boy, and God does! The text is so poignant we cannot miss it: ***"Elijah brought the child down from the upstairs bedroom and gave him to his mother, and said, 'See! Your son is alive!'"*** So isn't this wonderful little triptych of stories about Elijah showing us that, in the sweat-blood-and-tears world of everyday, God's will is life, abundant life, not just for the insiders we'd like to think we are, but also for "outsiders" like this poor widow and her son, whose Daddy may have been a Lebanese terrorist bomber, for all we know?

Now, as we've walked again through these deeply moving scenes of Elijah the prophet doing his thing and God doing God's thing—restoring life, did you notice how the story-line is repeated in Luke's report of Jesus and the Widow of Nain? Nain was a tiny wide-place-in-the-road village a few miles out of Nazareth, where life would have been hard enough for any Galilean peasant family. But—tragic as any death of a husband and father is for us now—the loss of that widow's husband was catastrophe! In the law of the times, a woman had no legal rights, could not inherit property, would be totally dependent on her son, if she were blessed to have one, to care for her and support her in her old age. And this woman had one, literally—"his mother's ONLY son", Luke tells us. ***And now HE has died! Double catastrophe!*** Not only is this poor woman widowed since her husband's death, and now childless since

her adult son's death, but, what's worst, now she is essentially yesterday's trash, a homeless cast-off in a society with no "safety-net" systems, nothing but poverty and grief ahead.

This is the scene Jesus happens upon—or was it just "happen-stance"? Jesus is passing through Nain, and meets the very funeral procession—the young man's body being carried, not in a casket, but in the open, on a sort of stretcher, on the way to the cemetery. Everybody must have known this woman and her son, for there's a big crowd. But all they can do is mourn with her. And in a few days, when the flowers have died and the casseroles are all gone, this widow will be facing a grim future of poverty and loneliness. And right there, for me at least, is one of the most touching scenes in the whole New Testament: "*When (Jesus) saw her, **he had compassion for her**, and said to her, 'Don't cry!'*" The New Testament word Luke uses there for "*had compassion*" is a very down-home, kitchen-and-back-steps sort of word. Literally, Luke says "**He felt it in his kidneys.**" (because in that culture, people thought the kidneys were the seat of all strong emotions). So, as we'd more likely put it, "**He felt it in the pit of his stomach!**" For Jesus, this widow in a little one-horse town, a stranger, somebody he'd never met—**is NOT** "just the bereaved in an out-of-town funeral procession". She is **SOMEBODY!** She matters! Her pain, her grief, but also her terrible loss, the looming economic disaster of her life—matter to Jesus.

Moved as I am, then, by this picture of his caring, I want to ask, "**Is this story about saving a poor widow from the grinding poverty that would soon be her lot?**" Yes, surely so. Surely, in the words of an old Gospel song, "O yes, he cares; I know he cares. His heart is touched with my grief." And Luke's parallel with the Elijah stories from 800 years before is clear as day—listen: "**And (Jesus) came forward and touched the stretcher, and the pallbearers 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!**"

It recalls for me a time when Timothy Martin, younger son of my friends Bob and Billie Martin—active, healthy teenaged basketball whiz (whom I had baby-sat years before)—was diagnosed, right at Christmas, with a fast-growing bone tumor in his leg. Urgent surgery was scheduled on **Christmas Eve**, with a **Jewish** doctor, friend of the Martins, in charge. At the end of the surgery, the doctor came out of the Operating Room, smiling, hugged Bob and Billie, and said, "**Y'know, it's really great when a Jewish doctor can give two Presbyterians an Easter for a Christmas present—the tumor WAS BENIGN!**"

Is this want it's about?—that God wants wholeness for all God's children, and Jesus was demonstrating that by raising the widow's son? But if so, then why not all the sick people—then and now? And why not in every heart-breaking case in your family?...and why not an end to all the sickness and all the poverty and all the trouble in the world? Well, surely Jesus WAS showing that in God's final, perfect Kingdom, it will be that way.

But what if, in addition to how deeply Jesus cared for that Widow in the village of Nain, ...in addition to his concern for life for the son and security for the mother,...in addition to all God's eternal desire to make us all whole again, ...What if this wondrous miracle was for the crowd that day in the funeral procession? Listen to what Luke says about them: "**Great wonder seized all of them, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!', and 'God has surely visited his people.'**"

Besides the widow and her son, was this for the crowd, who needed to be reminded that God still acts with power for suffering people...for the crowd, who needed to be reminded that when they saw marvelous things—"miracles" was their word for them—they could know that **God was STILL among them**, working with the same power that worked through Elijah, and most of all through Jesus?

Is it for US, who still need to hear both of these messages from the lips of the crowd at Nain? **The first message: In Jesus, God has sent us the final, full picture of who God is**, what God is like, and what God wants for all people. I know that I still need to hear it again, as it echoes in Paul's words, ***"It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of god in the face of Jesus Christ."*** As we wrestle with our 21st century questions, I hear again Jesus words to Phillip, who had asked, *"Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied"*. And Jesus replied, ***"Phillip,...when you've seen me, you've seen the Father!"***

And the second message: Whenever and wherever we see the hungry fed, the sick healed, the lonely welcomed, the enemy reconciled, we know God is here!

I think maybe it's for US, who need to hear again—in Paul's words—that we **are now Christ's Body in the world**, born here and placed here in this nerve-wracking time **to be Christ to this hurting world?** Now if we ask, *"But what about all those poor souls who don't have their needs met?"*...or *"What about all those fabulously rich people who have way more than enough and **aren't sharing it** the way we think they ought to be?"* When we ask questions like that, listen for the echo of Jesus' voice to Peter, on the lakeshore on Easter Day, when Peter wanted to know, *"What about **John**? What's going to happen to him? Is **he** your favorite?"* And Jesus replies, in effect, ***"Peter, it's you I'm talking to. I'm not talking about John. I need you to feed my sheep."***

And when we find ourselves asking, ***"Lord, what about all those folks who aren't doing what you told them to?"***, I hear Jesus answering, *"Curtis, (Julie, Tom, Joe, Mary),...you want to know if miracles still happen? Yes, they do! Come on out here in the world where I'm asking you to go with me here and now,...Stop worrying about what **somebody else is NOT** doing...Get active doing what **YOU CAN** do, and keep your eyes open. **You'll see miracles a-plenty!***