

## 6-06-2010 -Ruth Huston

I Kings 17. 17-24; Psalm 30; Luke 7.11-17; Galatians 1.11-24

Today we begin Ordinary time in the church calendar, the season after Pentecost. We're not on our way to Christmas, nor to Easter. We're not "on our way" anywhere. Just ordinary time when we're invited to stop for awhile, inhale nature's glorious perfumes and glory in baseball—the grace given by Detroit pitcher Armando Galarraga and received by umpire Jim Joyce, to pay attention to the everydayness of life, to notice the days and weeks as they go by. I would expect that the lectionary would kind of ease us slowly into the dog days of summer's ordinary time, but no wimpy beginnings here. We kick off Ordinary Time with a big bang, with none other than a resurrection of a dead boy in Kings, followed by an even more phenomenal resurrection in Luke.

I'm first drawn to these two resurrection narratives, in part, because of their obvious similarities, so similar, in fact, that we can't help but suppose that Luke's story was heavily influenced by the first: both Elijah (9<sup>th</sup> c BCE) and Jesus (1<sup>st</sup> c CE) are prophets, they both bring back to life the only sons of widows, the resurrections provide proof to the onlookers that these two prophets are clearly Godly people, they connect God to the people, what they do is interpreted as signs that God cares about God's people. God continues acting and interacting and redeeming. Wonderful similarities. No wonder people thought that Jesus was Elijah.

But I'm drawn to these two stories, in even larger part, because they give voice to the marginalized, the no accounts, the voiceless. It used to be that if a person studied history, she studied what the important people did and wrote and said, when they did it and where they were when they did it. Like kings and generals and inventors and the divinely gifted. People like Mozart and Attila the Hun and Stalin and Babe Ruth. Cuz the writing of histories was in the hands of the powerful and elite and they wrote about THEIR experiences, THEIR reality. But in recent decades, histories have begun to include the voices of those without power and prestige: slaves, women, oppressed. In his dissertation, my husband wanted to include in his study of the social history of Paraguay during the early 1800's stories of those on the margins of society. Since, of course, there were no books written recounting their experiences, he had to hear them through moth-eaten, dusty, musty, disarrayed documents of court cases in Paraguay's national archives.

These 2 widows in the Kings and Luke passages are the kind of people we don't read about in history books. Walter Brueggemann refers to them as "the otherwise" in his book, Testimony to Otherwise. In it, he says that Elijah's stories (and Elisha's after him) interrupt a long account of what we call a history of the kings of Israel. So we have over here the stories of the important people like Ahab and Jezebel and all the palace intrigue and shenanigans, war victories, the movers and shakers, the ones who seemingly control history. But then the writers of Kings

throw in stories of the “otherwise,” something “new, unimaginable, a ‘decisively different’ way for things to turn out, instead of the worn-out, despair-producing, cynicism-provoking ways of thinking and acting that we believe to be the way the world has to work,” we hear stories like the lessons this morning that “open to the listeners in daring imagination the claim that the world does not need to be perceived or engaged according to dominant shapings of power, to privileged notions of authority, to conventional distributions of goods, or to standard definitions of what is possible.” These are the “otherwise.” **Brueggemann**

These draw us further and deeper into the heart of the stories. These “otherwise” women aren’t just no-accounts. They’re at the bottom of the no-account heap. They have no hope. And they shouldn’t, really. Not if we believe the histories written by the status quo. They’re widows after all. In these ancient middle-eastern cultures, a woman’s survival depended on the males in her household: her father, husband and son. These two women are down to their last male, their sons, and even they die, leaving them with no respectable options for support. In addition to the emotional devastation of these mothers burying their only sons is their own impending destitution. They would quickly be reduced to poverty and forced to become scavengers and beggars.

And the widow of Zarapheth in Kings seems to be even worse off than the widow of Nain. In the verses preceding this morning’s OT text, we read that she and her son are starving literally to death. They’re poor and to make it worse, drought parches the land. All she has left is a little oil and some flour. She’s out gathering a COUPLE of sticks for their last supper, “that we may eat it and die.” But Elijah assures her that God will feed her and her son with a limitless supply of oil and flour until the next rain. And God does. God saves their lives.

On the heels of that story, is our story this morning. This same son whom God saves miraculously from starvation in the previous text falls ill and dies just one verse later. Can we imagine the injustice of it all? Things don’t seem to be going according to plan. Notice what the widow says. “What have you against me, O man of God?” I wonder what her tone is here—full of sarcasm? Some “man of god” you turned out to be. Is she turning on Elijah? Or losing trust in his God? “You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” What kind of prophet does that? And what kind of cruel joke is this perpetrated by a cruel God? God heals my son just to let him die a day later. Where is her hope now? The prophet doesn’t answer. He’s completely silent. No offer of assurance—“Don’t worry, it’s all part of the plan.” And no defense of God, “God wouldn’t do such a thing.” He simply commands her to give him the boy whom he promptly takes to the upper chamber where Elijah is staying and lays the boy on his own bed. Elijah needs a little private time with God. If they had had doors on bedrooms, we’d hear it slamming. I guess we’ll have to be content with cloth flapping! The first words out of his mouth? WHAT are you DOING, God? Are you TRYING to kill the widow’s son? Elijah is angry. He wants answers. Up until now, Elijah’s been rather obedient. Anything God tells him to do, he does. But God has crossed a line. Something shifts. Taking matters into his own hands, he stretches himself on top of the boy three times in a kind of sympathetic magical way, then commands God to return this boy’s life to him again.

Some translations like to soften the imperative here with a hortatory command, “Let his life return to him.” But I suspect that there’s a little more urgency here. Return this boy’s life to him. “The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. The life of the child came into him again, and he revived.” God listened to Elijah. How we Wesleyans love this image—cooperation with God in doing God’s work. James Fowler would be proud!

We might expect something different. Perhaps some tidbit from the narrator that explains that this was all part of God’s plan from the beginning or at the least, a good denouement where all the loose ends are tied up neatly. God saves the boy because he listened to Elijah’s voice. “Your son is alive.” **Amy Erickson** says that God does something God has never done in the Hebrew Bible and will only do again through Elisha. God undoes death. God mobilizes the power of life and does something unprecedented, something God has never done before. God reverses everything they know and “pulls a resurrection out of a hat!” Amy Erickson I find it particularly interesting that God does this, not in the usual places like palaces, marketplaces, capital cities, but in out-of-the-way places like Zarapheth. The widow’s reaction? “Now I know that you are a man of God and you speak the truth.” She recognizes what God recognized. That the word of Elijah was true.

As God worked in Elijah, so God works in Jesus by enacting a similar resurrection in Luke, the only gospel to record it. Luke often tells stories of the voiceless—this is one such story. At the city gate, Jesus, his disciples and a large crowd meet a funeral procession of the only adult son of a widow. Both her husband and her only son are dead. The woman is bereft not only of a son, but of any means to sustain her own life. When the two groups meet at the city gate, the Lord is moved with compassion. This is the first time that Luke calls Jesus Lord, at the moment when he is moved with compassion and mercy. Jesus says, “Don’t cry” and touches the coffin, an action that immediately makes him unclean by Jewish law. A simple gesture demonstrating his solidarity with the poor woman. He enters into her sarx, her life, identifies with her grief, becoming what she is. True compassion. He then commands the man to rise. He obeys, sits up and speaks. The crowd reacts with both fear and amazement. And just like the widow of Zarapheth, they proclaim that Jesus is a great prophet. This is a sign that God is among his people in Jesus.

There’s more “otherwise” in the other 2 texts also. The psalmist has been ill and so close to death that he has felt like he joined the dead in the land of the dead—Sheol or the Pit. God has healed him so he praises the Lord. The impossible has been replaced with possible. Even Paul in Galatians, recounting his own personal history as a devout Jew, refuses the present ordering of things, answers the call of God to live in “the otherwise,” changes the course of church history!

Don’t we just take in our breath at the “otherwise” of these stories? The possibility that there just might be an alternate universe where “we can recast our own lives out beyond the closed definitions we have too long inhaled?” **Brueggeman** (maybe that’s why we’re attracted to TV shows like Fringe, where FBI agents use unorthodox techniques to investigate a series of

unexplained, often frightening events that are happening all over the world—those agents know there's an alternate universe—or what about Harry Potter, Star Trek—they connect us to what's really real). The biblical witness knows of this land of possibility where God listens to people, has compassion and is moved to action, where widows are given voices, where dead sons come back to life, and where the present ordering of things is rejected. This “otherwise” has inspired people like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Oscar Romero, martyred archbishop of San Salvador, or Catholic worker Dorothy Day, who faced the impossible with possible. These same texts today call us forward into this alternate reality, where C.S. Lewis says, “There’s a new way of being human and a new peace made possible.” What is “the otherwise” to which God is calling you? Let’s stop for a while and pay attention. After all, we have **lots** of time—**ordinary** time.