

Lord Of Life – Judy Cox

1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

We Americans alternate between admiration and mistrust of royalty. Mesmerized by royal weddings, we're also appalled at their expense and ostentation, which come, at least in part, on the backs of those less fortunately born. Even without a monarchy, we know what it's like to be impacted by our leaders, caught up willy-nilly in the consequences of their actions—we have wielders of power called governors, and state representatives!

The book we now call 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings is actually one, divided in two simply because of scroll length. It shares our conflictedness about kings, both beginning and ending with ambiguity. Between those bookends of uncertainty it summarizes 40-plus royal lives over nearly 400 years, with cycles of good and evil, reform and apostasy, peace and violence. Our psalm's caution today, *Do not put your trust in princes*, might be its subtitle! Usually because these (mostly incompetent) men rule, trouble happens, and their people suffer.

At issue across this book is the unfaithfulness of the covenant people, usually led into this apostasy by their kings. In Egypt God delivered and called them to serve as God's home page, if you will, or window display, in order to draw the world in; so they are called to uncompromising, mutual faithfulness in their covenant relationship with God. Their unfaithfulness, in the worship of other gods, recurs again and again—here, specifically, with Baal. Under King Ahab and his Canaanite wife, Jezebel, Baalism has permeated the country, especially through syncretism, the blending of Baal worship with the worship of Yahweh. In following after other gods, the chosen people forsake the covenant, specifically the First Commandment, underlying all the others: *You shall have no other gods before me*.

God responds! God cares about the unfaithfulness of God's people, and keeps covenant. God competes for their minds and hearts! As with Pharaoh in Egypt, God faces down the opposition in order to (re)claim them, restoring relationship. And God cares about those outside the covenant too!

We began today's Old Testament reading 7 verses earlier than what's printed in our worship folder—thank you, Emma, for flexing with that last-minute addition! Here Elijah in the name of Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel, announces a multi-year drought—in your face to King Ahab's god Baal, whom Canaanites worship as the storm and fertility god, provider of rain for fields and flocks. (If we look closely at this first declaration of hostilities, we can discern just how thoroughly the particular God of Israel, Yahweh, actually wields the powers that the false pretender claims.) Elijah pronounces the drought, in fact, with an oath: *As Yahweh, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word*.

In intervening verses God sends Elijah into the desert, a very familiar Biblical motif. In the midst of desolation, God feeds him; curiously, at God's command ravens bring this food—birds of prey, so unclean by Levitical purity codes. (Not to mention the little matters of birds of prey picking up bread as well as meat, and providing take-out service!) Elijah drinks water from a

wadi, or seasonal stream—not so unusual. Naysayers might even attribute the seasonal water in that wadi to the provision of the storm god Baal! But time goes by, and the wadi dries up. *There was no rain in the land.*

We might miss the implications here—in the dry season, wadis always dry up. It's the cycle of life. Maybe you guessed it: in Canaanite mythology, Baal is considered to die every dry season, and then come back to life every rainy season. Not only is he called the storm god, rainmaker (and so provider of vegetation), but his worshippers also consider him “god of life,” with power over life and death.

Now we see another layer in Elijah's original pronouncement: it is *Yahweh, the God of Israel* Who *lives* (in contrast, by implication, with Ahab's Baal, who can't seem to stay alive). Life and death are key to this chapter, not only for humanity's sake, but as a power and characteristic claimed by both contenders!

A dried-up wadi doesn't hinder God's care. Now, also unlikely, provision lies ahead. Elijah obeys, reporting what God will do. Having experienced God's provision, he trusts God's promise enough to step out in faith.

This unlikely provider is a widow, another paradoxical source of provision—the most destitute and marginalized of society. Additionally, God sends Elijah as a beachhead deep into Baal's territory—to a Sidonian widow! She too would rank among the unclean, as a foreigner, fellow citizen with Ahab's foreign queen. Look at what happens: Elijah asks her, there where she's gathering sticks, for a little water. Encouraged by her apparent willingness, he adds a request for a piece of bread as well. Then we hear from her own mouth how badly Baal, the “god of vegetation,” has failed this family. Oddly, as she explains that they are at the end of their flour, and expect to die after this meager meal, she echoes the oath on Elijah's lips back in verse 1: *As Yahweh your God lives*. Is it sarcasm? Desperate hope? Admission that Baal HAS failed them? And how does she know Elijah isn't another Baal worshipper? Does he hand her his business card? We don't know! We do understand that the demands of hospitality in both their cultures would have required her to comply with his requests, and only the bitter truth could account for her shameful refusal to bring him bread.

*Do not fear*, says Elijah. Like other messengers of God throughout Scripture, he encourages this foreign widow of God's GOOD intent toward her. If she will feed Yahweh's prophet first, Yahweh the God of Israel (not Baal the supposed god over vegetation) will provide flour and oil enough for all their needs, until Yahweh (not Baal the supposed rainmaker) will send rain. Somehow Elijah's faith is contagious—she complies, and they all eat for days. Miraculously, mysteriously, neither the flour nor the oil fails.

In our final section, Elijah steps up as a prophet, into initiating, active mode, and God both listens and responds! The woman's son dies, or is as good as dead. The woman, desperate again, charges Elijah with drawing God's attention, assuming that God has been offended by her (previously unnoticed?) sinfulness and killed her son as punishment! She's forgotten that God was already attentive to them; their need registered with God, and through Elijah God provided. She can see only what she interprets as divine retribution.

But she's not the only one struggling with bad theology! Elijah acts with courage, taking the boy's body to the privacy of his room. There he prays, in anguish over what he sees as divine ambiguity. He challenges God in bewilderment, but still as "Yahweh MY God" (literally the meaning of his own name!). *Have you also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?* The common belief of his day, that all things must come directly from God's hand, pushes him to charging God with undermining his ministry! We have the benefit of reading all of Scripture, from Job to James, and in our Wesleyan tradition don't join in defaulting to those assumptions.

Note that despite Elijah's theological struggles, he trusts God even now, and so he asks. He stays in conversation with his God! All this is prayer, NOT magic—symbolically he carries out bodily what he requests verbally. Crying *O Yahweh my God, let this child's life come into him again*, he also acts out, "Let his lifeless body be as my living body." God hears! In response to the prophet's trusting request, giving space for his angry bewilderment, God's mysterious grace returns the life of the child, so that he revives.

Elijah, built up in his own faith and also vindicated before his host, gives the boy back to his mother: *See, your son is alive*. Now she, too, bears witness both to Yahweh and to Elijah as prophet: *Now I know that you ARE a man of God, and that the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth!* Neither Baal, nor any other pretender, but Yahweh alone is the Lord of Life!

Rev. Dr. Luke early in his gospel brings us Jesus' presentation of this Elijah story in Nazareth—one that enraged his synagogue congregation! Indeed, scholars tell us that throughout his gospel Luke deliberately links Jesus with Elijah, whose return, according to Jewish tradition, was to usher in the Messianic age. Where Matthew and Mark identify Elijah with John the Baptist, Luke shows Jesus fulfilling his role. Only in Luke, in that sermon in Nazareth, does Jesus explicitly link his own ministry to the ministry to the Gentiles of both Elijah and Elisha. The hinge of the book(s) of Kings, in the first chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, is the ascension of Elijah; mirroring that, the two-volume work Luke/Acts hinges on the ascension of Jesus. Elisha, having begged before Elijah's ascension for *a double share of [his mentor's] spirit*, afterwards continued Elijah's work and repeated some of his miracles. Similarly, in Luke, Jesus ascends and sends down his Spirit on the disciples who, empowered, do similar works to his.

Several uniquely Lukan stories evoke Elijah, including the disciples' wanting to call down fire on their opponents, and the disciple wishing to say farewell to his family. Today's gospel passage joins these, with Jesus in Nain calling to mind Elijah in Zarephath in matters of life and death and widows' sons—Jesus Who is not merely a prophet like Elijah, but divine.

Elijah the prophet required nourishment, received and promised God's provision, and requested of God a resurrection. The provision and the resurrection ultimately came from God, not Elijah. Jesus himself miraculously multiplies food. He himself provides! As today's gospel text shows, he himself raises the dead, simply with a command. His attention need not be caught nor drawn; without anyone prompting he sees with compassion the plight of this grieving woman, doubly bereaved and now completely vulnerable economically. He himself initiates the raising of her son, restoring life in his own power, without prayer to God.

Lord of Life—THIS is Who God is across our texts today, for us today! How then do we hold these texts? Do we extrapolate from them a blanket promise that we will have our dead and ill all miraculously restored in this life? No! We read all of Scripture, not just our favorite bits. We notice, in the very next passage, the reference to the imprisoned John the Baptist, whom Jesus could have rescued, and resurrected after his beheading, but didn't. Today, as is our practice twice a month, we offer the opportunity during Eucharist for anointing and prayer for healing. Our statement on healing reminds us, "Whenever and however people are healthy, whole, and healed it is God's work and part of God's salvation; but not everyone is healed from every affliction." In Sam Wells' words, as our statement concludes, "God heals sometimes, God saves always."

This, then, we do say: not merely a prophet like Elijah, Jesus is Yahweh Incarnate, the God of Israel, Lord of life, come to provide that life for the whole world! Compassionately he sees our vulnerability and brokenness, and offers us, like the widow of Nain, not only comfort but restoration. Entering our mortality, he encounters death not in a never-ending cycle, but once for all, emerging finally and eternally victorious. Where the first testament shows us would-be competitor gods exposed before the power of Yahweh, the second shows Jesus the Christ with power over the ultimate enemy, death. He triumphs over it as he undergoes and finally destroys it, through his own death, and resurrection.

Where do we find ourselves in these passages? Obviously, thankfully, we see we're not alone in our struggles with theodicy, the problem of death and evil and Who God is in all that. But are we the mother of Zarephath who jumps to conclude Who God must be, and then despairs? Or are we Elijah, who despite his bewilderment and anguish still trusts enough to stay in conversation? Can we in our confusion also cry out to God, and trust enough bring that confusion into prayer, whether we understand or not? Will we follow his example, and the invitation of Scripture, to ask for clarification and healing, both of our confused despair, and of our bodies?

What we can and do appropriate to ourselves from these passages, in the face of death, is the command and implicit promise, *Do not fear*. We turn from the paralyzing fear of death and join the crowd in Nain, looking at Jesus and with reverent fear glorifying God!

So we come to the Table today, another inexhaustible supply of desperately needed, and mysteriously provided, nourishment—the gifts of God for the people of God. We rejoice that this divine provision offers not only physical, but also spiritual life to any who will trust and come. We remember that the word Eucharist itself means "thanksgiving," and we join with all the Church in saying, "Thanks be to God!" Amen.