

June 5, 2016

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Sermon - "Responding to God"

We know that death is part of life, but somehow when it is untimely it seems unfair.

When death comes too fast or too close, we forget that it is part of the natural order.

We pray to God to reverse the circumstances.

We pray for strength.

In today's readings those prayers are answered, twice.

Elijah pleads with God to restore the breath of the widow's child and "the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again and he revived."

Jesus, moved by compassion by the grieving mother orders the young man "to rise" and "the dead man sat up and began to speak."

In our daily lives, we've become accustomed to experiencing the opposite--death interrupting life.

Hopes, dreams, and relationships are all casualties of death's intrusion upon our lives.

But Jesus does it differently;

Jesus impedes death's path and stymies the normal pattern of things.

With a touch and by a word Jesus brings life out of death.

This is the greatest of all interruptions.

Death is stopped in its tracks.

Death is rendered powerless.

Death is undone.

Indeed, death does not have the final word.

The final word belongs to Jesus.

"Rise!" Jesus says to you and to all, "Rise!"

I am disturbed by these miracles.

On one hand they are remarkable, unimaginable demonstrations of God's amazing power.

They are however, so unique, that I worry about the believer who prays for relief from the pain of grief and interprets God's silence as a lack of their own faith.

I struggle with Elijah having such extraordinary intimacy with God when last week he massacred all the Baal worshipers with whom he disagreed.

I search for the lessons in these passages.

What is God saying to us today with these tales of rebirth?

Perhaps these stories are here to remind us that God's power is much greater than our own.

Perhaps the message is that we can never fully anticipate God's action.

We simply do not know when or where God might intervene in the world.

We never know whom God might choose to bless or whose prayers for miracles will be answered.

God's will is outside of our control.

Another answer lies in the words of the hymn we just sang:

"We who once were dead now live, fully knowing Jesus as our head. Life overflowing when he breaks the bread."

Are these scripture stories about people actually being dead and having life restored or are they metaphorical, describing our own spiritual deadness, brought back to life by God's grace?

Could we be the dead sons of widows into whom the prophet and the Christ breathe new life?

One author commented that the word "desolation" fits the widow's situation, because it means "emptiness," and when there's nothing left, and you're totally empty, there is room for all sorts of grace to move in and grow. We surround ourselves with so many things, so many activities, so much noise, so many worries, it makes it hard for us to open up our selves, our hearts, to God's love and grace to fill in the empty places underneath it all?"

I do believe that the work of God's Holy Spirit is to provide this revitalizing breath on a continual basis.

God, who created us, recreates us all the time, giving us opportunities to renew ourself and our faith.

Does God see you as needing rebirth, renewal of your own faith?

One author this week suggested that the message of the scripture is we are dependent on God.

"On one hand, it's easy to fall into a childish dependence in which we believe that nothing is required of us, and God will just "swoop in" to provide for, protect and direct our lives.

On the other hand, it's also easy to fall into a cynical, functional atheism in which we give lip service to the idea of depending on God, but live as if everything depends on us.

Somewhere between these two extremes is a divine-human cooperation that seems to be the biblical understanding of faith.

In this way of living, we work as if it all depends on us, connecting into community and supporting and nurturing one another, while recognizing that life is far bigger than we are, and trusting in God's gentle nudges to guide us, and God's providence to sustain us.

There's a humility, a hopefulness, and a wonderful sense of responsibility that comes from living this way.

When we recognize that God usually works in very natural ways – and most often through other people – we are able to find the balance between faith in God, faith in others, and faith in the gifts and abilities that God has given us.

Yet another possibility for this powerful scripture message is to encourage us to use our imaginations.

Theologian Walter Bruggeman suggests that “the prophets dare us today to imagine a very different kind of world, a world not based on power and might and greed.”

Bruggeman points out that the widows in today's scripture stories are women who are ‘not privy to much newness.’

“These stories are about a new, unimaginable, and very 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.”

He calls on us to see our own lives differently as well, to venture out into the ‘sacramental’ practice of imagining a different world.

“The sacramental practice of imagining a different world.”

It doesn't have to be this way.

We do not have to blindly accept the world as it is and relinquish any hope that it could be better.

Christianity is based on the belief that a new world can be created, peace can be attained.

We are a people of hope.

We know that God's spirit can touch every person, regardless of life or location.

Imagination is one of God's greatest gifts to humans.

Using our imaginations we can envision a world where prayers are answered and death is conquered.

How do we get to that world?

I think the answer lies in Mendelssohn's interpretation of the widow's response.

God's grace and power can best be appreciated by loving God with your whole heart, soul and might.

This will change everything.