

Weekly Reading – Monday, May 31, 2010

I Kings 17: 8-16 (17-24)

To be sure, the two stories of Elijah's dealings with the woman in Zaraphath make it crystal clear that it is God, not Baal or any other god, who can bring drought as well as provide sustenance, who has power over both life and death. In the verses just prior to this reading, Elijah declares that God will cause a drought to fall across the land because King Ahab has turned from God and worshiped Baal. Then Elijah is sent off into the wilderness, where God provides water and meat for him both morning and evening. When the water dries up in that place, God sends him to Zaraphath where he meets up with the woman. God provides enough meal to sustain Elijah, the woman and her son until the end of the drought. And when the son stops breathing, Elijah prays to God to restore life to him. And God does it.

To be sure, these stories make it clear that God is the one who is in charge, who has the power to provide or withhold, who can bring life from that which is dead. Neither Baal nor any other god has that power. Obviously, that's the point of the stories.

And yet, what makes me pause in amazement this time through these familiar tales is what the woman does. We meet her when she has hit the end of her rope. There is only food for one more meal before she and her son will die. Times are beyond hard. Despair hangs in the air. And then a stranger shows up and demands that she make him a cake with that last bit of meal. Granted, he adds that if she does so, there will be enough meal to last for all of them until the end of the drought. The only way she can find out if that is true or not is to give it a try, to give up the last of what she has and offer it to someone else. She takes that risk. She gives it all, and in that act, she receives life.

When her son dies, Elijah tells her to give the son to him. Now, there's no reason she should hand over her son to this stranger, whom she senses had something to do with his death in the first place. It doesn't make rational sense that she would just let him take her son. But she does let him. She takes another risk; she acts in trust. And once again, it seems that such risk-taking, such willingness to let go is what opens the door for new life, for resurrection.

Perhaps we can learn from this woman what it is to take the risk and open ourselves in trust. And remember, Jesus also said something about being willing to let go, to lose our lives in order to find them.

Galatians 1: 11-24

To be sure, these words from Paul to the churches in Galatia are part of a defense he must present against those who oppose him. He makes clear that he did not receive the gospel he preaches from any human being, but through divine revelation. He recounts how God grabbed him, totally turned his life on its head, and

set him on the path of bringing the good news to the Gentile world. He makes it clear that he didn't check in with those who had the answers in Jerusalem, but set off right away with the gospel as it had been revealed to him. He headed to Jerusalem only after he'd been out working for 3 years.

To be sure, Paul gives God all the credit for his call, the content of his preaching and therefore the validity of his work. The point is clear.

That's all well and good. But I have to admit that what amazes me about this passage is the final verse. People who had never met Paul, who only knew him as a radical opponent to followers of Jesus, celebrated his work. They had every reason to be suspicious of him, to doubt his intentions, to believe he could be out to undermine the gospel. But they didn't go there. Instead, when they heard that he was preaching the faith instead of persecuting its followers, they rejoiced. They let go, trusting that God was once again doing an upside-down, amazing thing.

Now, I know that attitude didn't last for long, but just for a moment, let's celebrate another example of trust.

Luke 7: 11-17

In this story in Luke's gospel, we once again see the life-giving power of God at work. It is active in and through Jesus. It is that same power over life and death that we've seen before. There's another piece to it, though. Here we not only see that power at work, but we catch a glimpse of the heart of the One who has such power. When Jesus sees this widow who is now bereft of her only son and will most likely end up in destitute poverty, he has compassion. It is from that place of compassion that the life giving power of God flows. We can trust that. We see it in Jesus. And yes, to be sure, being witnesses to such compassionate, life-giving power in Jesus is the main point of the story.

And yet, aren't you once again amazed by the people in the story? Here this guy, Jesus, arrives completely out of the blue, and by some kind of magic brings the man back from the dead. Those people could have been cynical and disbelieving, claiming that the guy hadn't really been dead at all in the first place. Or they could have run Jesus out of town, afraid of what other disruption he might cause. Instead, filled with awe before such power, they noticed God's involvement in that event and gave God the glory.

In all three texts this week, there are those who are open to the possibility that God just might be at work to turn lives upside down (like Paul's) and bring life out of death. They are people who can let go and risk everything. They are people of trust. Perhaps we can learn from them all.