

Pastor T.C. Arnold
16th Sunday after Trinity
1 Kings 17:17:24
September 11th, 2016

The widow at Zarephath and her son appear center stage, along with the prophet, in the Old Testament reading (One-Year Series) this Sunday just as they did last Sunday. The widow's scene is much like it was last week. Her plight is severe. Her sufferings reach beyond what she can bear. Last week she cried out to Elijah that she had nothing left and that she was going to take the little food not yet spent, bake it, eat it with her son, and then die. This week, someone dies. The anguish is severe. The suffering continues as her son's breath is no longer in him. What will she do? What will she say?

She says exactly what you would expect in the tone you would expect. *"What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance **and to cause the death of my son!**"* Maybe, in so many words, much like last week's plea to Elijah and the Lord, the widow could have expounded on her sufferings... "You know, before you showed up, things were bad, but at least they weren't as bad as they are now. You eat my food and my son dies. I'm not sure what I have done to deserve this. Why are you punishing me? Why do you lay open all my sins like this? Why, Lord why?"

These questions are the same for us who suffer the trials and tribulations of living in a sin-laden world. We wonder what we have done, and we ask God such questions as these, when grief presses upon our hearts to the point we do not know what to do. There are times when we are gathering a few sticks, like the widow at Zarephath, when suffering shows up and asks for food we don't have and takes from us what we value the most, our precious son. We know this woman better than we think. We know her struggles when God shows up and makes things worse instead of better. We know what it is like to cry out from deep within as we are filled with fear and confusion about why it happened while wondering, "What will God do to me next?" We have been there.

Fifteen years ago today, the church staff (at Christ Lutheran in Platte Woods, MO) wheeled a television down the hall, plugged it in, and tuned in to the news. We were shocked to see two large buildings in downtown New York in flames. If a person were alive to remember that day, we all remember where we were. Shock, despair, grief and all kinds of unimaginable suffering took place that day and for many days that followed. The country was filled with sorrow. People asked, "Where was God?" People shouted, "God showed up to punish a nation that has become apostate. God's judgement came through evil means to reprove a people who chase after other gods." All sorts of assumptions were being fashioned in the hearts of people everywhere to explain how such a horrible things could happen. Lash out, is what we did! Shout with a heavy heart at God, is the way we prayed!

And praying with a heavy heart is not wrong. Shouting our grief-laden petitions at God in times a great distress is not wrong. Did Elijah tell the widow at Zarephath to shut up and stop speaking to God in such harsh ways? No! The Psalms of Lament not only give us permission to be honest with God when troubles abound but also *demand* that we talk with God when such things weigh heavy on our hearts. Elijah's response is God's response. He didn't say "stop speaking to me like that." No, rather, he said, *"Give me your son."*

Our malady occurs when we don't give God our son, our problem, or anything that troubles us the most at this particular time. We don't give what is wrong to God because we don't think

He will act. I mean, for crying out loud, that terrible thing still happened to you. That horrible situation got worse. Those buildings in New York and Washington D.C. still went up in flames and fell to the ground... people died... people suffered. What will God do?

Get angry. Get mad. That's okay. St. Paul even says it... "Be angry... *but*... do not sin!" It's easy to sin while angry. In anger we do one of two things... We either go toward the one we are angry with and have words, or, we run from, we hide from, we want nothing to do with the one we are angry with. In our sins we have the habit of going away from God in our anger. We do what St. Paul urges us not to do in Ephesians. We let the sun go down on our anger. We hold the grudge. We act in spiteful ways. We refuse God's presence and His unending gifts. Anger causes us to retreat and hide from the one who could have done something about our problem. We hide and we blame. Brothers and sisters in Christ, be not a "hider" in anger. Be not one who allows anger to turn into sin. Do not "run out" on God's gifts of salve and reconciliation. Repent and go toward, talk, lament, and shout your troubles to the Lord. He listens to you. He is with you. He will sustain you.

In this text we see anger spun in the correct direction. It's directed toward God... the widow went toward God... and God did not go away. No, God went toward her and gave her a gift He promises to give to you too. This gift was not given to some pious Israelite. This gift was not for someone of noble birth or upstanding character. This woman was a Gentile and God was not enacting a punishment upon her. No! Rather, He was demonstrating His kind of grace. He would take a woman who seems to have no status as a child of God and He goes to her and gives her life – the life of her son. He is a God for all people and His gift makes dead people alive.

So, it didn't matter that she was not a Jew. It didn't matter that she confronted God's servant with "matter of fact" words that were formed out of the emotion of anger. It didn't matter how rich or poor, or how much we think she deserved it or not. The Lord listened and He responded the way only the Lord can. The same goes for you. No matter who you are... no matter if you are a life-long Lutheran or a brand new Christian... no matter if your transgressions are big or small, the Lord's love, His presence, and His gift of life in forgiveness is for you.

So, now, here is the new scene. The players are the same... the woman, her son, and the prophet. And we can't forget about the presence of God. He is right there in the same place as suffering and death. He is there with His promise of life for dead people, because we share this same stage at the widow and her son. He is there for us, who are dead in our sins, who suffer the consequences of our indiscretions, who live in a fallen world and feel those affects every day, assuring us that we are not alone in these troubles. He is there for us, carrying our death to the top of Mt. Calvary and pouring out new life from His veins. He is there, the main player on the stage of life, in the midst of all that sets out to harm us... that wants us dead. He conquers, He triumphs and now, by His grace through faith, so do we. Thanks be to God! He makes the dead alive! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.