

Save the Day
I Kings 17:17-24 / Luke 7:11-17
Colebrook Congregational Church
3rd Sunday After Pentecost / Proper 5C / Ordinary 10C

In this week's scripture, Jesus is described performing a miracle, raising someone from the dead. These types of stories serve to demonstrate who Jesus truly is, and this one demonstrates Jesus' power, for only someone filled with great divine power could raise someone from the dead. The crowd takes Jesus to be a great prophet, and they thank God for bringing Him to them.

A lot of scholarship has focused on the Christology of this event, but very little has been focused upon the widow herself.

A woman in Biblical times in the near east could not inherit land or wealth, so if she became a widow, she was in very dire straits. A widow was without legal protection, exposed to harsh treatment and exploitation. For someone to die before old age was viewed as a judgment upon some sin, and the reproach for it was extended to the surviving spouse, making widowhood a disgraceful state. Sometimes, they are able to marry a brother-in-law or be part of his household, or rarely, return to their father. Widows had no respectable recourse but to rely on public charity.

But that treatment was contrary to God's Will, as revealed in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. According to Psalms, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Job, and Isaiah: Neglect or oppression of widows provoked divine wrath; and we are charged to show mercy to them, along with the traveler and orphan.

In the New Testament and the writings of the earliest Christians, we find that steps were taken to ensure that widows were taken care of; that there was an equal distribution of food; that cost-effective plans be used to ensure that they could be provided for; and that there was an order of widows that devoted themselves to intercessory prayer and rendered special services to the church.

So consider how the widow was actually being treated before the church and look at today's Gospel lesson again.

Jesus goes to a town that no longer exists and finds a funeral in progress. The woman is a widow, and the deceased is her only son. While it is not expressly stated, it seems to be assumed that she has lost her only means of survival as well. Her future looked bleak. Those listening to the Gospel back then would know that this was her plight. Thankfully this is not something that modern-day widows need to worry about at the same level as back then.

This is probably why Jesus intervened. Otherwise, he could have resurrected anyone else. He chose to resurrect the only son of a widow, not an artisan, not a musician or poet, not a great soldier, but the only son of a widow. The text tells us that when Jesus saw her, He had compassion for her. He must have known what hardships lay in store for her. But Jesus swoops in and for her, saves the day.

The timing reminds me of a TV trope. Like from the old westerns, when the heroes are in great peril, and at the moment when hope is about to be lost, over the hill comes the cavalry, riding in to save the day! Or like the last of the Lord of the Rings movies, when the great city was about to fall to the siege of orcs, but then, over the ridge came the human cavalry to break the siege and save the day.

That's what Jesus did for that widow...but without the horses and swords and guns. She was at a moment of great loss for her only son and facing destitution, but Jesus walks into town and saves the day for her.

Jesus is not the only one who can save the day for someone. Our lives should be full of examples where we have helped someone, especially a stranger, and have saved their day. Using the gifts that we have been given, just as Jesus did with His own gifts.

Kyla recently shared a story with me. A family in Tampa, FL, had a newborn daughter named Rowan, and they were constantly taking photos of her. At around one year old, they found that one of her eyes had a strange glow. It was not visible to just sitting and looking at her eye, only through flash photography. They assumed that it was an artifact of the flash, but posted the photograph on one website.

A woman from Manchester, England, happened to be on the same website, and had a neighbor whose child had the same kind of artifact found only in photographs. It was a rare and aggressive form of eye cancer, called retinoblastoma. Only a couple hundred cases of this occur per year, so an early and quick diagnosis is life-saving. The Englishwoman emailed the Florida family and they took her to a specialist who confirmed the cancer, and started treatments.

What are the odds? And also in an age of rampant apathy, that someone used their gifts and cared enough to follow through, and in effect, saved a baby's life.

Besides looking at the act of Jesus raising someone from the dead and marveling at how powerful He is, look at the motivation behind the action. Sometimes, when Jesus does a miracle, He is very upfront that He is doing this as a demonstration of power to prove who He is. This was NOT one of those times. It explicitly says that Jesus had compassion for the widow, and that is why He did it. Not for God's glory, not for His own popularity, but for a woman in pain, a woman who has lost everything.

We are all blessed with gifts, and we can use them to help save someone's day. It doesn't have to be as big as a resurrection or a diagnosis of an ailment; it can be anything. We do not always know what other people are going through, and the smallest thing can be the difference between the straw that breaks the camel's back or the one good thing that happened that day which they can hold on to and anchor to. All we must do is open our eyes to those around us, to see the struggles of others, and help as we are able; or allow ourselves to be moved into positions where we can address the needs of others; if we do that, we can save the day.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Mighty God, Your hands hold the power of life itself. You restore life in the face of death, bringing hope out of despair and promise out of destruction. Through the breath of Your Spirit bring new life to us, that we may announce to the world the power of Your presence made known in Jesus Christ our Savior. We give you thanks for the compassion Jesus showed to the widow. Let His actions be an example to all of us, a lesson & reminder, to show compassion to all and to use our gifts as we are able. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Holy & Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of life and for all the blessings of this life, for family and friends, and for love abundant.

We pray that you forgive us for failing to grasp the wonders of Creation. Forgive the smallness of our vision, the narrowness of our outlook, and the weakness of our agape. We ask for Your assurance and we promise to do better going forward.

Be with those who are distraught, those who cannot sleep, those who know not peace and seek it, those who are in need, and those who are unwell in mind, body, or spirit. Help us to comfort them with Your abundant Love. Bless the services of all Your people, and assure them that You are pleased with their work.

We pray that You help lead us through our own trials, the sufferings and sorrows, the challenges and struggles, and back to Your Love. Fill us with hope, sustained in Your mercy, giving us guidance through Your Word, and stamina through Your Spirit.

We especially pray for:

Transform us and all our broken ways, so that we can be made whole, and in that wholeness, may we be the hearts and hands of Christ, Amen.

1 Kings 17:17-24

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "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!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Psalm 146

146:1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!

146:2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

146:3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

146:4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

146:5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,

146:6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

146:7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free;

146:8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

146:9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

146:10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!