

"Vital Signs," 1Kings17:8-16; Luke 7:11-17; 6/10/2007, Albany UMC

Today's scripture readings tell us about two very similar stories. Both are about widows that each loses a son, and their lives turn dramatically into hope with divine intervention.

In the story from 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah visits a home of a widow in a town called Zarephath. This woman has been very kind to Elijah because she lets him stay there. Having someone stay in her home may sound like nothing big, but it was during the terrible drought from which the entire nation of Israel suffered. Of course, even in such a situation, if you have family and money you may have no problem. But here in this case, we are dealing with a poor widow who lives with a young child. They did not have enough to eat and almost nothing to drink; they were about to fix their last meal and die.

Under such a situation, this lady is asked by Elijah, "Get me a little water in a jar that I may drink." And that is not all. He adds to what he asks from her, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand too." Can you believe this? How cruel he is! All this poor woman had was a handful of flour and a little oil. She could have said, "No way, this is not even enough for me and my son." But the text says, she brought the last meal she fixed for the Man of God before she and her son tried to eat them. And because of this obedience, the text says, God provided the family everything they needed. They never had to worry about what to eat any longer.

And that was not the end of the story. The widow's only son becomes ill. And the boy finally dies. The poor widow strikes out at Elijah, as if somehow this was his fault. "Hey, this is all because of you." Elijah had no desire to strike back. He took the boy's body from her arms, carried him to his own bedroom, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, what's the matter with you? Help me! I am in big trouble. Then he cried to the Lord over and over, "O Lord my God, let this boy's life come back to him!" And the text says, "The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him." What a story!

Luke's story is a little different. Jesus and his disciples are visiting a town called Nain. A large crowd follows them. As they approach the town gate, they see a funeral procession. A body is being carried out --the body of a widow's only son. Jesus did not know this woman but when he saw her, his

heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" And miraculously this young man who was dead sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. Luke tells us that the people who saw this "were all filled with awe and praised God."

My question is, why these stories? Why did they put these stories for today's lectionary reading? Certainly, we can talk about the human death. What is more difficult to deal with than death in our lives? About a week ago, I heard a terrible phone call from someone saying that one of the members of my previous church died. She was not even 60 years old. One of the nicest people that I ever met. She had given my entire family free haircuts for 7 years. Can you believe this? Upon hearing that, it was a total shock to me. For several days, I could not function properly because of it. Many of you have been there. The emptiness. The fear. The loneliness. For some people, life stops just right there even years later. In today's stories, the pain of loss is even bigger because both women are widows and they lost their only sons. They had lost their husbands. Now their only child, their only hope, is gone.

First of all, the Old Testament story tries to assure us that it is God of Israel, not of Baal, that people were to trust especially in their time of need. In those days, the majority of the nation including the King and his wife tried to get away from God. They were indulged in the Baal worship. Nowadays, Christians are becoming minorities more and more. People choose to go wherever their Baal is. For some people, it is money; for others it is their pleasure. But the scripture says clearly that those who trust God never fail even in difficult time. God takes care of his people. God provides them with what they need.

Second, the New Testament story shows us clearly that Jesus has compassion for the widow. She did not even pray to God for help. He approached to her instead and touched the coffin. Jesus knew what she needed. As human beings, sometimes we do not even know how to pray when going gets tough. But Jesus, the Son of God, knows and reaches his hand to us first!

In our lives, death is all over. We hear about peoples' death all the time. But there are also different kinds of death. It is a spiritual death; if there is a disconnection between family members that is a death that needs to be revived.

If there is a disconnection between our individual faith and social issues, there is a death in our faith that needs to come back to life. If there is disconnection between members of the church, there is also death that needs to be resuscitated. And God wants us to be alive. God cares about our wholeness. What we need is just come before God as we are and show our pains and needs. God will see us and help us. In Romans 14:8, St. Paul says, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

What we need is trust Him. Trust is a vital sign that we need to show God. A commentator says, "If religion has nothing to say to a grieving widow, it has nothing to say." (New Interpreter's Bible IX, 159) I take this word as another vital sign for God's compassion for all of us. At the same time, this is also what God wants from us as a vital sign of aliveness in our faith. James 1:27 in the New Testament also says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress."

God loves and cares for us with great compassion. Not only that, He also wants to help us in helping others. So with God's help, let us show our compassion for others that all of us have a vital sign that we are all His people. Amen.