

“Life Restored”

A Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

Leonia Presbyterian Church

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1 Kings 17:8-24

Luke 7:11-17

Have you known this woman? For a while she was living paycheck to paycheck. Then, the work she'd been getting as a domestic dried up when the economy crashed. Her husband had already been deported, back to their home country, back to the old neighborhood where the gangs had already found him, as they had threatened. She hoped she could stay in the States longer. When she looked at her son, she saw he is now on the threshold between boyhood and adolescence, as the roundness of his body gave way to more chiseled features and his voice alternated between squawking and a smooth tenor, and also alternated between the mother tongue he shared with her and the newly acquired English he had mastered so much more easily than she. He was ripe, at the age when the gangs back home would try to recruit him. Her hope, with her husband, had been for a better life for this boy. But now, as she looked at the cornmeal and oil left in their kitchen-- only enough for a couple of tortillas-- she could see they were one meal away from complete hunger, one illness away from frailty, one wrong move away from *la migra's* suspicion and deportation, one breath away from despair. Was it really worth it? Sometimes she wondered if they should just give in and see what would happen if she chose no longer to be *en la lucha*, in the struggle. She looked again at the boy and knew that before long there wouldn't even *be* a choice.

When I read the story of Elijah's encounter with the widow, my mind pictures this woman. I don't know her well. But I have seen mothers like her coming through the food pantry in the town I last served as pastor, with their children in tow to help carry grocery bags. I have met with parents in Honduras and Colombia who shared this widow's fear for their children's safety in neighborhoods where political or gang-related violence is the norm. Last week, I met with staff from CoFIA and First Friends and learned more of the struggles undocumented immigrants face here in northern New Jersey. And I am also the daughter of a single mom, a mom who pieced together a living for us the best she could but at times was at a loss as to how it would all work out.

It is to this woman that Elijah the prophet, and later Jesus in the gospels, brings hope.

For widows in the bible, the world is already a vulnerable, precarious place to be. Along with the grief that comes from the loss of a spouse, as women without husbands, widows lacked financial power, social standing and property rights. The Mosaic law made no provisions for widows. For this reason, when Naomi in the book of Ruth became a widow, she asked that people no longer call her Naomi, which means “sweet” or “pleasant” in Hebrew, but *Mara*, which in Hebrew means “bitter.” A widow with a son, however, could hope that her son would grow to provide for himself and his mother and give her the standing she had lost when her husband died.

When Elijah encounters the widow at Zarephath, he has ventured far beyond any of his other activities in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Zarephath was a marginal place, located far in the northern region, where Lebanon would be today. A woman at the margins of society, in a village on the margins of Israel, and about to enter the margins between life and death with her son as they nearly starve: this is the woman Elijah approaches and asks to be fed. He asks this woman, who has so little left, to give it to him. She puts up a weak fight; after all, she thinks they will starve anyway, so what is the difference between starving today or starving tomorrow?

Elijah proclaims God’s gift to this woman and her son: the jar of meal and the jug of oil would not empty until the day the drought of the region ends. She could feed Elijah. She could feed her son. She could feed herself. They would live.

And yet in a twisted irony, her son falls sick anyway and dies. I can identify with the way this widow held her dead son to her bosom, as if her body can give her son life as it did when he was a baby. Recently my daughter startled us from her bed as she sat up screaming, flailing and kicking. Head back, she roared. She was having a night terror in her sleep. My wife and I tried holding her, stroking her hair, giving her all the body contact that would normally soothe her during a typical preschooler tantrum. We tried to rouse her with a cool washcloth, with lights and with singing. But nothing we could offer would work and only seemed to make it worse. The fit went on for at least 20 minutes, and I was just about to read up on how to do an exorcism when peaceful sleep overtook her body just as suddenly as the night terror had come on. I watched in wonder as her thrashing body just *relented* and fell back into its restorative slumber. Sleep, you win this time.

Unlike many healing stories, neither the widow who meets Elijah or the widow in the gospel passage exhibits wondrous faith. Rather, they just seem to relent to what God, what Jesus, will do. The widow who met Elijah was kind of antagonistic-- she questions whether Elijah has made a mockery of her and her son to highlight her sinfulness

through his death. The widow in Luke never even says a word in the passage, but Jesus had compassion on her and said to her “Do not weep.” It is not because of their virtue or effort or faithfulness that these widows’ sons are restored to life. Maybe God just figured they needed a break.

God has a special capacity to reach us when we are most broken. As broken people, we have more edges onto which God can encounter us. I do not say this to glorify brokenness, but to say that God finds the contours of our broken pieces and breathes life into them. We may be recipients of that grace. We may also be *bringers* of God’s grace of new life to others on the boundary of hope and despair, faith and fear, connection and isolation, life and death.

Now Betsy, as an elder, we will not ask you to bring the dead back to life! At least, not in your first year as a ruling elder. But we do ask that you be open to receiving God’s grace in ways that are beyond your control. *Relent* to what God can do. We also ask that you be willing to be God’s instrument to offer that grace to others, and to make this church a place where people can come and receive that grace in transformative ways. This is a task that *all the church* is called to-- not just its ordained people. If God can work life-restoring wonders on a pagan widow in Zarephath who probably worships Baal, why not relent and give God a chance to do something wonderful for and through us?