

YOU LIFT ME UP
Sermon: June 6, 2010

Lectionary 10 Proper 5 Second Sunday after Pentecost
Texts: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Psalm 30; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

This past Friday and Saturday, two members of Ascension and I attended the 23rd Annual Synod Assembly of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. We were there as voting members representing this congregation, joining together with delegates from over 200 congregations of our Synod.

The theme of the Assembly was “You will be My Witnesses” based on a passage from Acts 1:8. Throughout the assembly, we were challenged to consider what it means to be a witness and how each one of us as believers in Jesus Christ as Savior can witness to each other and to others in our lives and in our communities.

One of the things I most took away from this Assembly was a reminder of the power of story. When we gather together for worship each Sunday morning, we come to an intersection of God’s story and our story. God’s story comes to us in Word and Sacrament. Our story is the accumulative narrative of the events and circumstances of our lives, the meaning that we attach to these events and circumstances, and how we interpret them through the eyes of faith. To be a witness is to tell our stories.

The title and theme of my message this morning is *YOU LIFT ME UP*, taken from the first verse of our psalm for today, which reads, “I will exalt you, O LORD, because you have lifted me up.” And the question I ask this morning is this, “in what ways have you been lifted up by God?”

In our Old Testament lesson for today, we have a passage from 1Kings 17 that is taken from the early part of the story of the prophet Elijah. Our passage begins with verse 8, but I want to go back a few verses to set this story in context. Beginning with chapter 17:1 we learn that Elijah has been sent to confront Ahab, the King of the Israelites, who “did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all the kings who had gone before him”.

What was Ahab’s crime? He and his wife had become worshippers of Baal and had built altars and shrines to honor Baal, the Canaanite god of storms and fertility. So the LORD sends to Ahab a prophet named Elijah. Elijah announces to Ahab that there will be a great drought in the land. Presumably, the drought is a direct punishment for the evil deeds of Ahab.

The Lord directs Elijah to go to a place east of the Jordan River in which he would be spared from the effects of the drought. The Lord promises Elijah that he can drink from the Wadi Cherith and he will be fed bread and meat by ravens. But eventually the Wadi dries up as the drought reaches even east of the Jordan River.

So the Lord then instructs Elijah to go to town named Zaraphath in the region of Sidon located along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. He is instructed to live there with the

promise that a widow who lives there will feed him. So Elijah goes to Zaraphath, finds the widow outside the gates of the town gathering sticks. Remember, in ancient times, widows and orphans were at the lowest end of the socio-economic value system. Their lives depended on the largesse of others or on whatever scraps of food and wood they could find that were left behind by others.

So this woman is literally scrambling for survival when Elijah enters into to her life. Now you would think that the story would go in the direction of Elijah provided help for her. But instead, he requests that she bring him something to drink and something to eat. How could he possibly expect her to have enough food and drink to share in times of draught and poverty? So she tells him that she has nothing baked. All she has is a handful of meal, a little oil, and just a few sticks of firewood which she was going to use to prepare one final meal before she and her son die.

But Elijah says, “do not be afraid.” Go and prepare a meal and bring it to me and then you can go make something for yourself and for your son. At first glance, these might seem like selfish words, something akin to saying, “too bad you and your son are struggling, but I’m more important so feed me, first”.

But this story isn’t about the actions and attitudes of Elijah. This is a story about the Lord; a story of how God provides and lifts us up out of the depths of death and despair, even when it feels like we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We’ve all been there – times when all the vitality has gone out of our lives, when it feels as if we are on the verge of physical, emotional or spiritual death.

So Elijah assures the widow that the Lord has promised to bring a blessing into her life – a blessing that she will experience as a miracle. The jar of meal and the jug of oil will not be used up. It will remain full until the end of the draught. And that is exactly what happens. The threat of death by starvation will go away, forever.

But then, tragedy strikes again. The woman’s son takes ill and soon dies. What should be a time to celebrate is soon a time to mourn. The woman is grief stricken and shouts out to Elijah, “What do you have against me, O man of God? Have you come to remind me of my sin, and to cause the death of my son.” Remember that in those days, it was believed that the tragedies in one’s life were the direct consequence of one’s sin, or the sin of one’s ancestors. What sin could this woman have done to cause the death of her young son?

But Elijah does not engage her in a discussion of the causes of her tragedy. He takes the son out of her bosom, carries him up to the room where he is staying, and lays him on his own, that is Elijah’s bed. He then cries out to God, “Have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” What kind of God is this that would punish a woman who has helped Elijah, God’s prophet, and done everything she has been asked to do? Are these the actions of a just God?

I have never experienced the loss of a child. But I have been with others when they have lost their son or daughter. It is one of the most difficult things I have ever done as a pastor. The grief is profound. There are no words that can drive that grief away. The only thing you can do is sit with them in silence and internally ask the same question as they do, "is this fair?" Where is God and why did God let this happen. Are these the actions of a just God?

Not waiting for an answer to his question, Elijah places his body over the child's body three times crying out to God, "Please let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listens to Elijah's pleas, and restores life into his body. And so you have this powerful moment when Elijah comes down the stairs, returns the boy to his mother's bosom and says, "See, your son is alive." We can only imagine the joy that this woman feels in this moment when she discovers that the son she has seen breathe his last breath, is now alive! In her joy, she says to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

Centuries later, this story would repeat itself; a story told in our Gospel reading for today. Another nameless widow is grieving the death of her son. This time it is Jesus who restores life to a lifeless body. This time it is Jesus who returns a beloved son into the arms of a woman whose grief is turned into joy. This time the miracle is seen by a whole crowd of people who shout out: "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!"

Both stories give witness to the God of whom the psalmist sings:

I will exalt you, O LORD, because you have lifted me up
and have not let my enemies triumph over me.

**O LORD my God, I cried out to you,
and you restored me to health.**

These stories and these words give a prophetic witness to a God who is the source of life and desires for us to live life abundantly; to a God who is the source of love and who desires for us share this love abundantly; to a God who is the source of being and who desires for us to live the lives we are created to live. This is God's story as it is revealed to us through the witness of our scriptures.

But where do we enter into this story? In what ways have we been lifted up by God? Now if this were a synod assembly or if we had more time, I could ask you to turn to someone next to you and invite you to discuss that very question with each other. In what ways have you been lifted up by the God? But don't be afraid, I am not going to ask you to do that. But it is a conversation that you might want to have with someone over the course of the next week. For when we tell our stories, we become witnesses to what God has done and is doing in our lives. And in witnessing we make it possible for others to see the presence of God working in their lives. That is what witnessing truly means – sharing our story.

So reflect upon these things. How has God lifted you up? Has there been a time in your

life when you have felt like you have been walking in the shadow of death; times when you have felt less than alive physically, emotionally, or even spiritually; times when you have questioned if God really cares? Did something happen to breathe new life into you? Did you see the hand of God working in you and through you? We have all been there, some of us might even be there right now. It is in telling the story that we realize that we are not alone and we realize what others before us have discovered. God is good, God does care, and God is there with you in the shadow of death willing to lead you back into life.

Thanks be to God! Amen.