

Pentecost 5, 2016: Widow stories

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship
Will Fitzgerald
May 22, 2016

1 Kings 17:8–24; Luke 7:11-17

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Today, I would like to preach a sermon about your need to pray always and not to lose heart.

But I'm not going to tell you the parable about the woman and the judge that Jesus told: how a woman asked and asked and asked for relief from a judge until she got what she wanted.

Instead, I want to look at the stories of the two widows we read earlier, and then a third story of a widow.

The first widow is the unnamed widow of Zarephath. She reluctantly provided hospitality to the prophet Elijah. Her reluctance was not because she was stingy or mean. Her reluctance was because of her extreme hunger and worry over her child. Even after God provided her, her son, and Elijah with food, her son became ill and eventually stopped breathing. I even wonder if it was an illness caused by his body's weakness during his starvation.

There is a painting of this scene from a Jewish synagogue in Syria, the Dura-Europas synagogue¹. The synagogue was buried in sand to prevent its destruction by the Persians around 256 AD, and was uncovered in 1932².



Let's "read" this painting together. I'll try to be explicit in my description for those who can't see it.

First of all, it's a fresco, which means it's a watercolor painting done on wet plaster, so the paint becomes part of the plaster until it dries. The colors are mostly dark reds and blacks and whites. There is a kind of a frame or decorative band around this section.

The painting is divided into three parts. It's a little bit like a cartoon in this way: each part is a different panel. In the first panel, we see the widow of Zarephath holding her baby up. She is dressed mostly in black. She's mourning the sickness of her child. You can't see her face or the boy's face; online, I read that this is because this shows their grief. It seems apparent that she's very much not just a passive participant in this scene: she's holding up her son, who is kind of lunging towards the next panel that shows Elijah on a bed. One can easily imagine her saying to Elijah about his so-called miracle: "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!"

The second panel takes up about half the painting. Elijah is on the boy's bed, holding him. We can see Elijah's face. There is some drapery above Elijah and it creates a kind of halo around his head. Elijah is dressed all in white, the child is still in the dark red of illness. In the scripture it says Elijah "stretched himself

upon the child three times” and cried out to the Lord. And the Lord answered his prayer. In this panel, you can see a hand coming out of the sky; the Lord’s hand, I think.

The third panel shows the widow of Zarephath standing, facing us. We can see her face. She is holding her son. We can see his face, too. She is no longer dressed in black: she has a pale gold dress and a white blouse. She holds her child calmly. He is dressed with a white shirt, and looks healthy.

When I think of the widow of Zarephath, I think of a woman who is really trying to protect her son. The three conversations that we have all center around her concern for her son, first when he is starving, second when he is ill, the third when he is restored. Her deep desire, her prayer, is to see him whole, and she rejoices fully with Elijah when he is restored.

The second widow is the widow of Nain. (I should say “Na-EEN,” but I’m going to say “Nain”, like “gain.”) Her story is so closely reflective of the widow of Zarephath, but it has some differences. Rather than being inside the widow’s house with just the widow, the son, and the healer; her story takes place in a very public place, with a large crowd of witnesses, and the healer’s disciples present. Rather than a child, it’s a man. Another difference is that Jesus, as it were, happens to be passing by when he sees the funeral procession; he comes to her aid without her asking.

I have another picture to describe³. It’s very different from the first picture. It was made in 1973 by a Japanese Christian, Sadao Watanabe. His prints are done in a traditional Japanese folk style.



This is a bold print with vivid colors: red, black, orange/green and whites. One reason I chose it is that, like the fresco, it has time-based panels. In this case, there are two. They go from top to bottom, rather than left to right. In both panels, there is a person in the center, and three people on either side. In the top panel, on the left hand side, there is the mourning widow being supported by a friend, with another person looking on. Their eyes are almost closed. She is bent with sorrow. In the center is Jesus. I think he is saying, "Do not weep." On the right side, there are three of his disciples (looking a bit, I think, like Jesuits).

The bottom panel shows the son being raised from the dead. He is in the center, his hands raised in praise, his funeral shroud lowered so we can see him alive, but still on his bier. On the left are two more disciples and Jesus, whose hand is raised in healing and blessing. On the right, the widow bows in awe, and two more of her friends look on. Everyone's eyes are wide open.

I said that I wanted to preach a sermon about your need to pray always and not to lose heart.

The stories of these two women and their sons encourages my heart. What distress is greater than that of a mother losing a child, or in fear of losing a child, whom she loves? I can look around this room and think about our sons and daughters, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, family members and various shirt-tail relatives whose loss we feel or whose loss we fear. Or friends in distress, or children who have no mothers, who are refugees and at risk of illness and starvation.

These stories remind us that at times, and that time and time again, God works miracles in the lives of those whom we love. God doesn't heal everyone; we don't see salvation and wholeness present in all that we wish to receive it. But we should not lose heart, and we should pray always.

There is another widow the scriptures tell us of. A woman to whom promises were given that her son would be unique. A woman whose husband died (most probably) before that son began to fulfill his unique calling. And she watched that unique calling and the promises coming to pass, only to see her son arrested, tortured, and murdered by the state, killed in a ghastly and painful manner as she looked on.

I would like to think that she did not lose heart, and that she kept praying even as she felt this deepest pain. For the widow Mary saw her son, too, rise from the dead. Unlike the widow of Nain's son, never to die again, but to reign and send the Holy Spirit on his disciples founding a movement based on his teachings.

So, do not lose heart: these stories of Bible widows remind us that in the deepest despair, there can be God's life breaking through, new life, a resurrection of the dead.

¹ “Dura-Europos synagogue”, Wikipedia.org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos_synagogue accessed June 16, 2016.

² “Dura Frescoes”, Reed.edu, http://www.reed.edu/humanities/Hum110/dura_images04/dura.htm accessed June 16, 2016.

³ “The momigami works of Sadao Watanabe 1973-1974”, The SadaoHanga Catalogue, <https://sites.google.com/site/sadaohanga/momigami-1973-1974>, accessed June 16, 2016.