

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**Sunday June 6, 2010**

**Proper 5C 2010**

*(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):*

In the Name of our one living God who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, we finally get to leave John behind! I don't know about you, but to anyone who preaches, that is a relief. We get to leave the world of theology of the mind to return to the world of theology in real life. And isn't that where we all really experience God and how God works. That is what the Bible really is – a collection of books written and rewritten over a thousand years attesting to how people experienced God working in their lives and times. In our readings today we see God acting powerfully, as only God can do,

Did you notice that the similarity between our reading from the Book of Kings about the Prophet Elijah and the widow and the reading from Luke about Jesus and the widow? Actually, if you plot each out sentence by sentence you will see that they are virtually identical. That's not a mistake and, no, Luke isn't a plagiarist. It's Bible talk. The same stories get told and then retold to make a point. The point isn't the story – the point is the larger meaning, the larger truth that the story points to.

Humans are intrigued by things that are bigger and more powerful than them and are fearful of things they cannot control. When we are young, there are lots of things that are more powerful than we are and very few things that we can control. When I was 5 or 6 we moved into one of the new suburban subdivisions that were being built to house the families of all the GIs who returned from World War II. We were one of the first families to move in while the other homes were being built. My new friend Stevie and I would spend hours climbing the dirt

piles from the excavating or daring one another to jump into the unfinished basements. The most amazing things for us were the huge trucks and construction vehicles. Nothing could be more powerful than those. They stormed through the neighborhood like juggernauts.

In our reading from the First Book of Kings, we encounter one of the great early prophets of Israel – Elijah. Elijah just sort of appears on the scene as sent by God to challenge King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab had failed to live up to his duty to God as the anointed king. He married Jezebel, the daughter of the gentile King of Sidon, and for her raised up altars to the Phoenician God Baal in all the high places. Ahab tolerated human sacrifices. God sent Elijah to Ahab to declare that a drought would fall over the lands. In the midst of the resulting famine, God tells Elijah to go to Sidon (the land of Jezebel) where he would find a widow who would feed him.

Elijah asks the widow for water and a morsel of bread just as she was preparing a last meal for herself and her son from the last of her provisions before they die of starvation. Elijah then uses the words angels always use when God is about to act; “Do not be afraid.” When she trusted and followed, they miraculously had enough to eat for days since the oil and flour never gave out. But then calamity happened. The juggernaut of death took her son nevertheless. The widow asked if Elijah was an agent of death from God because of her sins. Elijah takes the corpse and ignoring the purity law against touching dead bodies, lay on the body and beseeched God to let life come into the boy again. God answered and Elijah gave the woman back her son. She acknowledges Elijah as a prophet and man of God since only God can give life.

This was a story well known to all Jews. Luke had previously reminded his readers of it when he told of Jesus being rejected by the synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus had reminded them that God had acted on behalf of a Gentile when there were plenty of starving widows in Israel, thus challenging their belief that God was only for them.

In our Gospel lesson we see two processions approaching each other in the town of Nain

near Nazareth. The first is a funeral procession bearing the body of a widow's only son. This was a calamity since the widow had no inheritance and now has no man to provide for and protect her. She is totally powerless and vulnerable. The procession gets larger and word spreads as they bear the body through the town to bury it outside the walls. Another procession led by Jesus approaches the town. They meet one another at the gate of the town – a place where combat would occur during a siege. Jesus has compassion for her and tells her, "Do not weep." He then, also ignoring the purity laws regarding dead bodies, comes forward and touches the bier carrying the body. He commands, "Young man, I say to you rise." Jesus then gives the widow back her son. The crowds are seized with fear – bible talk for being aware of the power of God in their midst.

There are, however, significant differences in the two accounts. Unlike Elijah who acted alone in a closed room, Jesus acted openly in the most public place in town in front of two large crowds. Unlike Elijah who called upon God to restore the child, Jesus acted on his own authority to issue the command to restore life. Compassion and the power of God restored life where there was none.

What do these stories mean to us today? I think they echo the question Moses placed before his people, in his final address to the people according to Deuteronomy: "I place before you life and death. Choose life." That question is ever before us, posed now by the one who himself overcame death. Which procession do we walk in – the one bearing the dead or the one bringing life? At Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out to the world to bring new life into the world. It takes courage and compassion to do this. It also takes a willingness to let go of old beliefs and ideas in order to grow in faith. Elijah had to let go of the idea that the king was always an agent of God's will in order to see and to challenge Ahab's greed and apostasy. Jesus had to let go of some common ideas in order to see and to challenge the Temple's injustices and the Pharisee's mindless and literal interpretation of the Law. This is also a challenge we face today.

Many are convinced of the invincibility of technology. However we see every day oil gushing out of a pipeline that failed at 5,000 feet below the sea. It threatens life not only in the sea but also on land. What happens when a well drilled at 9,000 feet below the sea bursts? Addiction brings death and we are addicted to oil and our political system is addicted to oil's money. We see the destruction of a major city by a hurricane and yet we watch as our barrier islands that protect us are destroyed. Here in Maui we watch our reefs that protect us die and yet we continue with injection wells and other environmentally harmful ways. Our children are our future and yet here in Hawai'i we have balanced our budget by having Furlough Fridays – that is, on the backs of our kids and their teachers.

Jesus commands “Rise.” We, too, have to accept Jesus' command and choose life. It takes compassion, faith and the courage to change.

AMEN.