

Sermon 6-5-2016 1 Kings 17:8-16 Luke 7:11-17 “Surprise, Surprise!”

In each scripture we heard today, God made a HUGE difference in the lives of the people involved. Elijah earlier in Chapter 17 of 1 Kings had told King Ahab that God was going to bring about a drought, which would last for years. And so the drought happened. No water, no dew. In the midst of the drought, God sent Elijah to a poor widow in a foreign land who was at the end of her rope. The drought had taken its toll, and she was now planning on fixing one last meal to share with her son before they died of starvation. Elijah went to her and asked for some food, and told her not to be afraid. She did as Elijah told her, and her jar of meal was not emptied, and her jug of oil did not fail. There was blessing, according to the Word of God.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus saw a widow’s only son being carried for burial. We are told that Jesus had compassion for the woman who now had no protection, and so he touched the funeral bier and told the young man to rise. The man did, and began to speak.

If either of these things happened today so that we could see them, we’d likely be surprised, yes? But most of our time, we don’t see much happening when it comes to God, at least not things so dramatic.

Trying to figure out what to say today, I read a quote by a theologian named Robert W. Jenson that has stirred my heart since I saw it: “A dead god will never surprise you.” (*Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, vol 1, p. 194) The gist: “A dead “God,” that is, a god that we concoct ourselves, is a controllable, containable, manageable idol that stays put and can be dependably used for our purposes. A *living* God shocks, moves, and uses us for God’s purposes.” (explained by William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, vol 44, no. 2 year C)

The story is told that two men went fishing. One man was an experienced fisherman, the other wasn’t. Every time the experienced fisherman caught a big fish, he put it in his ice chest to keep it fresh. Whenever the inexperienced fisherman caught a big fish, he threw it back.

The experienced fisherman watched this go on all day and finally had to ask him, “Why do you keep throwing back all the large fish you catch?” The inexperienced fisherman replied, “I only have a small frying pan.” (*Still More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, p. 67) So what excuse do we make about God??

Our own expectations and “faith frying pans” may be limiting what we are able to receive from God, how we are able to recognize God’s active and alive presence in our lives.

In my prayer time, I started asking myself and God, Have I tried to keep God in my own person “God zoo”? How can I let God be alive for me? “What surprise can I imagine? How could God surprise me?” I don’t really need anything; we have enough. We’re not hungry or in a drought, we have a place to live. We are thankful for our children. Our health is good, at least for now. So how can God surprise me? I don’t play the lottery — Hey, maybe if God made me win the lottery without my buying a ticket, I would be surprised??

Even for folks with heavy needs, we still try to define pretty strictly what we want. “God, let this ticket win, and I will do good things with the money.” “Make my loved one healthy, Lord.” “Give me a job.” We really don’t want surprises, we want God to do what we want!

Another illustration: There was once a college student who was struggling in many areas of his life. He spent a great deal of his time feeling angry and frustrated. When he could stand it no longer, he went to the dim and seldom-used chapel on campus. He paced up and down the aisles, slapping the back of the empty pews. He yelled, he cried, and he raged at God.

“God, you created the world... what could you possibly have been thinking? Look at the problems people face, the pain, the suffering, the hunger, the unfairness. Look at the neglect, the waste, the abuse. Everywhere I look, I see messed-up people, addicted people, hurting people, lonely people!” The young man ranted and raved on and on.

Finally, exhausted, he sat in the front pew and looked hopelessly at the cross. Its tarnished surface reflected the dusty sunlight filtering in through the stained glass windows. “It’s all such a mess! This world you created is nothing but a terrible mess! Why even I could make a better world than this one!!”

And then the young man heard a voice in the silence of that dusty chapel that made his eyes open wide and his jaw drop. “And that’s exactly what I want you to do.” (*More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, pp. 174-5) Surprise!

And there it is. In the midst of all the burdens you are carrying and the fears you have, God is with you; you are not alone. But even more, God has work for YOU to do, even if you’re very old or very young, even though you may feel weak and very uncertain about it. God knows what we can do, and how strong we are, and the gifts we have been given that perhaps we have not even recognized ourselves. God can surprise us, by helping us notice all the blessings, even God’s presence right now, right here, every breath of each of our lives.

One last illustration: A young boy was waiting after church for his family. The pastor saw him and decided to see how much the children were learning in Sunday School. He asked the boy, “Young man, if you can tell me something that God can do, I will give you a big shiny apple. The boy thought for a moment and then said, “Sir, if you can tell me something God cannot do, I will give you a whole box of apples.” (*Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Michael Green, ed., p. 170) Perspective.

My prayer for all and each of us, right now, is “Please, God, surprise us, not with what we have been demanding, but with your vision, the possibilities for our lives and this world that YOU see. Give us a hint of how alive you are, and please help us to be alive to life and to you.” Amen.