

A Widow's Rising

1 Kings 17:8-24

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June 6, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

As the autumn of 1347 approached, not a soul on the continent of Europe knew that the world, or at least the world as they knew it, was about to end. They were basking in the fading glow of the High Middle Ages, enjoying the final flowering of its culture, unaware that its decaying petals were falling faster than could ever be imagined. The romantic chivalry of knights and pleasant songs of minstrels would, within months, be replaced by a mixture of abject fear coupled with the low hum of funeral dirges. The world would end, not with a riotous commotion or a supernatural fire, but with an October breeze gently pushing a small fleet of merchant vessels into the harbor of Messina, Italy.

Located on the island of Sicily, Messina was one of the great commercial centers of Mediterranean shipping. Her citizens were used to seeing cargo-laden ships from Venice, the port of Ostia and even the Byzantine Empire anchored in her harbor, so when twelve galleys, flying the flag of Genoa, sailed into her wharf, she didn't even raise an eyebrow. Everything was business as usual. The fishermen continued to unload their daily catch while the elderly woman of the city gossiped from their windows. Children even ran along the golden beaches trying to catch the late autumn wind. Only when the gangplanks of the arriving vessels were lowered did the townspeople realize that something was amiss. The sailors, spilling onto the docks, were not hale and hearty, but reeking of pestilence and disease. To the mounting horror of Messina, one of the unfortunate men reportedly shouted: "Behold, I am Death." The prophetic accuracy of his words would echo down through the following decade as twenty million souls fell victim to the bubonic plague.

Historians alive during these terrible years, would be overtaken, rather frequently, with an uncharacteristic and even apocalyptic fervor, noting often in the diaries, that, "all flesh died that moved upon the earth." Even when one places such exaggerated statements to the side, one can't help but detect within their words, a quivering uncertainty, a fear that death and despair have the upper hand, that faith and history are irrelevant and that what is real and lasting has decomposed into senselessness before their devastated eyes. The historians speak of a culture that doesn't know how to go forward or even if going forward is worth the risk. After all, what story is left to tell when all the stories you have ever told have ended not merely miserably, but as mirrors upon which death preens at its own reflection. In such circumstances, one finds it difficult, even impossible, to believe that death does not get the final word, that death does not get to be the deciding factor in one's life, that death does not get to make our stories, our histories, into "mere buckets of ash" to use a phrase coined by the author Carl Sandburg. At times, we have trouble believing that life, even in the harshest of situations, overcomes the power of death. It is a wonderful thing, then, that in such moments of doubt, we

have good company.

Take, for example, this morning's reading from the Book of First Kings. The writer tells us that Israel has been without rain for sometime and that a horrible drought has gripped the land. Even some of the more remote streambeds, like the Wadi Cherith where the prophet Elijah has holed himself up, are beginning to evaporate into nothingness. This lack of rain is proving to be highly embarrassing for King Ahab. In the ancient world, kings bear the responsibility for ensuring the prosperity of their people, which, in Ahab's case, means securing a bountiful harvest, a feat not easily accomplished without water. His national policies, which have included the rather poor choice of marrying Queen Jezebel of Sidon and the placing of Israel under the protection of the storm-god Baal, are an ironic and laughable failure. After all, who has ever heard of a storm-god unable to produce rain or give life to the land? The only thing Ahab's flirtation with this foreign deity has brought to Israel is death. The king is not only impotent but largely oblivious to his own complicity in creating the present situation. He can only watch as the crisis, like the sewing of a burial shroud, continues to grow, affecting everyone, rich and poor alike. One imagines, that the poor, as always, bore the brunt of these difficulties.

Standing among these unfortunate souls, or so the writer of First Kings tells us, is a nameless widow. Such women are always nameless. They are easily forgotten and readily pushed to the margins of society where life and death, even in the best of times, engage in their precarious dance. We are told very little about her. She is poor, hungry and seemingly hopeless. Her days are spent scavenging, looking for scraps of food while trying to ignore the raw heat in her staring belly. Her eyes are rimmed by tears, which like the streams beds, have gone dry. She anguishes over the one thing that she is still able to lovingly hold in a world determined to leave her with nothing, her beloved son. Her son is her only hope, her welfare system and her tenuous link to life. He is the reason that she wakes in the morning, that she braves the barren landscape outside the city gates of Zarephath. He is the reason that she rears her head daringly against the power of death one more day.

And yet, with each passing sunrise, death, despite her best efforts seems to draw closer. The scraps of food, in recent days, have all but disappeared. She has been unable to replenish her cupboard. This morning, all she can find are a few miserable sticks scattered on the dusty ground. Her despair is palpable as she leans over to pick up one last bit of kindling. As she straightens herself, she notices something in the distance. At first, she thinks it is a mirage or a trick of the eyes, only when the shape draws closer does she realize that a man is approaching. Dressed in worn clothing, his name, we are told is Elijah and that he has come to find her. The widow, of course, knows nothing of this strange turn of events. She is merely struck by the man's audacity, by the way he strolls right up to her and then without so much as an introduction says: "Bring me a cup of water. I require a drink." The widow, though taken aback by his behavior, does remember her manners. She does not wish to be inhospitable even in such miserable times as these, so she turns to go in search of a ladle to gather water. As she goes, the prophet makes another request, shouting after her: "Oh, by the way, could you bring me

a little bread?” His words contain a strange fulsomeness. They hint at life and expectation and yet they sound so foreign to the widow as they reverberate through the growing hollowness in her being. She turns toward the imposing prophet. “I have nothing baked,” she says, “only a little bit of flour in a jar and some cooking oil in an old jug. They are all that we have. I was planning on preparing them this evening for my son and myself. We were going to eat them and then await the arrival of death. Her voice is matter-of-fact, her words contain no exaggeration, just resignation. There is no hope or fight-for-life left within her.

Elijah, in an interesting twist, doesn’t dispute her words, perhaps, because he knows something more about death than she does. He merely looks at her. His eyes filled with compassion. “Do not be afraid,” he says, “go and prepare your meal. Just bring me the first cake off the stove. The God of Israel will provide, you will see. By God’s word, your jar of flour will not become empty and your oil will not give out.” Elijah’s declaration may well be good, particularly for those of us sitting in these pews, but for a woman who has no intimate knowledge of the God of Israel, his statement is a hard proposition to swallow. She is consumed with doubts. For the widow, Elijah’s words are not life-restoring guarantees so much as hooks upon which the possibility, even probability of death gets tangled. If she gives Elijah what little food remains, then she and her son will, in all likelihood, be signing their own death certificates. The decision, of course, is hers, and whether through fatalism or by faith, she chooses to do what the prophet asks. In return, the God of Israel, in characteristic fashion, is true to his word. The widow and her son are granted an unending supply of food, a meal that never ceases to suffice, a cruse of oil that never empties. They are given life in the midst of death.

But now the plot thickens, death is not quite done with Elijah or with this widow. The boy, the widow’s only in this age and in the age to come (or so the widow believes), dies. She is overcome with distress. As far as she is concerned, her son’s death is her own as well. She blames Elijah. “Why did you have to interfere?” she yells at him. “Your presence has placed me on God’s radar, and look at what has happened? He has punished me?” Despite the miracles occurring daily in her kitchen, miracles which speak of a God who has placed himself squarely on the side of life, she can still only see death as a grim finality, as a word unto itself, not as the arena from which the possibility of resurrection emerges. For the widow, who, in a manner of speaking is living out of an un-baptized existence, there can only be the dying, her heart is not yet capable of embracing the rising. Elijah will not permit her heart to remain in such a state. “Give me your son! Hand him over to me! Give me this moment of death!” Taking the boy from her arms, Elijah does something remarkable. He prays. He hands the death over to God, he holds the death open before God’s power, calling God’s attention, not merely to the boy, but to the boy’s grieving mother. The power of life flows through this moment. The boy takes in breath and so, too, does his mother. “See, your son is alive” Elijah says. There is a rising. Good news finally breaks through as her fatalism gives way to faith, to an assurance that God, indeed, is on the side of life, hope and newness. The widow releases her doubts about the future, about life and about death. She places her trust, her body and her soul, into God’s hands. As much as you and I may wish to explain the power of such a moment, we cannot. The moment must merely be witnessed

to, through our living and through our loving, through our dying and through our rising, until such a time as the world itself can affirm, with the widow, that the “word of the Lord” in our mouth is truth.