

Emmaus Road Sermon

June 6, 2010

Anita Rediger

Gathering Sticks

As we gathered for Spiritual Reflections at Swiss Village on Tuesday morning we considered the two passages which are part of our worship, this morning. We read these words of sons being restored to life...and then we began to tell our stories. Ellen sat to the immediate left of me – her son died just last year at this time- a cancer death age 54. Helen was seated beside Ellen. Her son died about 5 years ago – also a death due to cancer; he was a physician and father. Mabel, next to them, remembered the death of her 20 year old brother – so many years ago - and also the death of her young adult grandson- Andy, in an accident the summer after his college graduation. As we pause this morning, we are keenly aware of those among us who know the heartache of the death of a child or young adult. Lukas, as we celebrate your graduation from Bluffton U., we remember with you the reality of the bus accident which resulted in the loss of precious young men's lives.

Alongside of these real-life experiences, I find myself asking... **What are we to do with these texts; accounts of beloved family members dying and then being restored to life again? Where is the Good News – for us – in these stories? How does the Good News come to us in the reality of our lives – when those we love die AND *are not* resurrected to another chance at earthy existence? These are difficult questions, but I invite us ask them and to wonder. Could it be that my focus on the resurrection of the young men is not the actual focal point of these account? But if it isn't...then what?**

What are we to do with these two texts: one from the Old Testament and the other from the New? Each one relates to us the anguish and despair of a woman grieving the death of a son. These women were widows; they had already lost their husbands. At least they had their sons; that is. they *had had* sons – until now. Now, their sons, too, have died and their already tenuous lives have become *even more* risky and uncertain. In cases where there were no male relatives from the family of the woman's husband able or willing to provide for her as benefactor, she was destined for the dangerous margins of society. (Remember Naomi's despair and Boaz's saving actions?) In the days of Elijah, in the days of Jesus, a solitary woman had no means, she had no voice. Now that their sons had died, these women were in trouble!

Our texts for this morning are resurrection stories. They have happy endings. The widow of Zarephath has her dead child restored to life by the power of God through Elijah. The widow of Nain also has her son returned to her – brought to life at Jesus' command. We marvel at these acts of healing. How dramatic! How wonderful! How we wish it were the same for us. Don't we wish for the Haworth family, as they grieve Spencer's death – just last Sunday, that Jesus would meet the funeral procession and say, "Young man, rise!"

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Let's return to the text of 1 Kings 17: Elijah is tramping through the desert. He's escaped the wrath of "Bad King Ahab...and his Baal worshipping wife- Jezebel. Elijah hadn't told them what they wanted to hear so he was on the run. Elijah camped for awhile along side of a brook. Ravens brought him food and he drank from the stream.

"But after awhile the stream dried up, because there was no rain in the land." The Lord prompted Elijah to go to Zarephath, to a *widow that the Lord had commanded* to feed him. Elijah set out. It sounds like he had to walk for awhile before the town of Zarephath came into view. How thirsty must he have been by the time he happened upon the city gate? How parched must his voice have sounded when he spotted a woman outside the city wall at work "gathering sticks?" Elijah "called to her and said, "Bring me a little water so that I may drink..." Stop and think about it, perhaps like this; we find ourselves as refugees in deep trouble; our very survival is at stake – our most basic needs are threatened. We need water; we need food...and we need it soon! In response, God gives direction to our pleas. Yes, God responds alright...and sends us to a homeless person for help! A person that doesn't even have enough to meet their own needs! That's where God directed Elijah in his time of great need! Who would have guessed?

What has happened to the mighty prophet of God who only days before was rubbing shoulders with the most powerful people in the Kingdom? What has happened to the man of God who surely by his stature would be deserving of God's "special treatment?" Elijah, the great prophet, with a tongue so thick and parched that the words can hardly come out calls out to – no- not the nobility of the city; rather he finds himself even more needy than the poor widow who – without hope for a future – gathers sticks for a final meal with her child and then the torture of watching her child starve. The story unfolds with a beautiful expression of human vulnerability and faith resulting in seemingly miraculous sustenance for everyone involved. There is food for Elijah; there is food for the widow and her son. There is a future, but then, all seems lost – the Widow's son becomes so ill that he dies. The death of the son also rings a death knell for his mother.

Jesus and his followers happen upon a funeral procession...everything is leading to the grave – the young man is dead; his mother, now, "as good as dead." Jesus interrupts the direction of this entourage and offers new life.

Even in the home territory of Baal – God is present and active – providing way forward when hope wanes. Even when the funeral procession leads to the grave, Jesus comes along side with invitation to new life. Yet we know that such resurrection events are not exactly duplicated in our experience. Could it be that these stories are not necessarily about dead sons, but rather a dramatic expression of God's desire to be present with the very "dredges" of society, "the stranger, the orphan...the widow?" Could it be that these stories relate to us that "everybody matters, everyone counts...that there are no expendable people?

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Could it be that these texts challenge us to acknowledge our own vulnerabilities – even when it seems we have access to seats of power and wealth? Could it be that these texts point out – God’s invitation, to not only accompany people *to* the grave, but also as they *return* from the grave to the new, uncertain and uncharted future? Yes, in these texts, we are offered a greater hope than the restoration of pulse and respiration. We sense that in spite of death, in the face of death, God gives us companions and fellow sojourners to walk the uncertain days with us. And isn’t it often the most unlikely of folks who come along side to offer “bread for the journey?” And, aren’t we all widows, orphans and strangers in some way?

Even in our most vulnerable times, we are the body of Christ. As the hands and feet of Jesus, we can act as Jesus did for the surviving widow of Luke 7. He focused on what she- in that culture – needed to go on living. He offered her the gift of life. We can’t restore lost loved ones to life; we can’t replace them and we don’t want to. But, we can share one another’s pain. We can offer - by the mysterious power of the God of Elijah and the Spirit of Jesus – healing and hope...the gift of life!

As the people of God, as the body of Christ may we- in the tough times - gather sticks together -acting in faith that God will meet us as we share our flour and oil. As ones who often find ourselves in the midst of a funeral procession – because of all kinds of “deaths” – may we allow the Spirit of Christ to be present in the midst of the procession.

No matter where we are on life’s path – student, grad student, college student, adults – young or old - we share the journey – on this journey, may we share Christ’s resurrection power which is given to us!– Thanks be to God!

Luke & Nick...come forward: Also, Linda & Jim...

Gracious God, grant us, we pray the will to declare ourselves Hearers, Bearers and Dreamers of your life-giving word. AMEN