

Sermon for June 5, 2016 (Proper 5, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17

Title: Do Not Be Afraid, Do Not Weep

Think back on some of the most challenging, most difficult, even the most painful events in your life. In hindsight, are you able to give thanks for these times of trial – in spite of the hardships – because these situations enabled new strength, new possibilities, new life to grow within you?

This is the heart of the message that I believe the Holy Spirit wants to communicate to us here this morning. Today, we have two stories about widows facing very challenging and painful situations involving their sons. These two stories are linked quite intentionally.

In fact, the story in Luke's Gospel seems intentionally designed to mimic the encounter between Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. Even the response of the people indicates the connection: "A great prophet has risen among us!" (Luke 7:16). A great prophet like Elijah, THE great prophetic figure after Moses in Hebrew tradition.

In addition, this incident between Elijah and the unnamed widow of Zarephath is one of the stories that the Lord referenced earlier in Luke's Gospel on the Sabbath that he returned to Nazareth and spoke in the temple.

Do you remember what happened in that setting?

Jesus spoke about how this Gentile widow was fed and cared for rather than any Israelite widow, and how a Syrian general was cured in the days of Elisha rather than any Hebrew people.

And the people were so incensed by this that they attempted to throw Jesus off the cliff! But they could not – his time had not yet come.

Both of these stories present to us a picture of God's intervention in the lives of people who are completely vulnerable.

No parent should ever have to bury their child. That is an unequivocal tragedy, in any circumstance.

But it is especially so for a widow. For a widow to lose a child is an economic tragedy as well as an emotional and spiritual one.

Widows in a society with a male-dominated economy, if they were also childless, were left without any means to provide for themselves. They were powerless and quite hopeless. And entirely vulnerable.

The good news in these cases is that a prophet arrives unbidden on the scene, and God intervenes.

But what is it that these prophets say to the widows? If you look at these words just on the surface, as typical human interactions, the words of our prophets do not make much sense at all.

When Elijah asks the unnamed widow in Zarephath for a morsel of bread, he says to her, “Do not be afraid.”

Seriously! There is a severe drought in the land, which has led to a horrible famine. She and her son are about to starve to death. She has rations for one final meal. There is nothing on the horizon for her. Absolutely nothing! And this stranger from a foreign land comes up and says to her, “Do not be afraid?” Are you kidding?

In the same way, Jesus meets the funeral procession outside of Nain for the widow’s son, and he says to her, “Do not weep.”

Do not weep! This widow has lost her only son, her only hope for the future, her child. She has to bury her child, and she has nothing to look forward to now but a lonely and desperate future, and this stranger comes up and says to her, “Do not weep?” Are you kidding? Don’t weep?

On Tuesday, the Church remembered the Feast of the Visitation, the event recorded in Luke’s Gospel just after Gabriel’s visit to Mary when Mary rushed off to be with her cousin Elizabeth who also was expecting a child.

It is not a direct parallel, but Mary also was living without the social protections of marriage. Living and traveling as an unwed mother.

And when Mary arrived at Zechariah's home and met Elizabeth, the elder woman greets her and says, "Blessed are you among women."

Blessed are you! A young girl, unmarried and yet pregnant in a way which she cannot understand herself – let alone try to explain to her family and neighbors!

A young girl pregnant out of wedlock in a society which would have condoned her being stoned to death as a disgrace to her tribe and family!

With her not yet having spoken to Joseph to plead for his protection and grace and compassion – with Joseph holding power over her life and death in his hands, and she having no idea at all how he might respond.

And Elizabeth says to her, Blessed are you among women?!

In all three cases, this is not at all what we would expect to hear in the course of our average human interactions.

Something else must be going on here, something which is difficult for most of us to understand.

In Elizabeth's case, Luke states that she was filled with the Holy Spirit! This is why she spoke as she did.

In Elijah's case, he was an inspired prophet of God, also filled with the Holy Spirit. And, of course, in the case of our Teacher and Master Jesus, his words carried the power and energy of the Holy Spirit.

So why is it that the Holy Spirit speaks so often in confusing and confounding ways? Why does the Holy Spirit tell people not to be afraid, not to be sad, not to be worried about what others might think and say?

It's not just these in three cases, of course. There is a regular pattern of the Spirit speaking in this way – over and over again in the Bible and in the lives of the saints.

Be not afraid. Do not weep. Do not be anxious. Let go of your worry.

Now, let's be honest, OK? Is this simply polyanna talk, wishful thinking?
Is this perhaps a good example of how religion serves as the opiate of the masses?
Is this offering people a pie-in-the-sky false hope that "things will get better" even when all evidence suggests otherwise?

No, it is not. My friends, I believe that the Holy Spirit is pointing us to something far deeper and far more profound.

Here is simple truth which, I believe, the Spirit wants to convey to us:
It is the painful, difficult events in life which open the door to growth, to new life, to discovery, and to freedom.

On the contrary, happy, easy events make life fun, delightful, but they do not cause us to grow.

And the one thing that we must do in this life is to grow, to become.

Only those things, those people, those situations which cause us discomfort, angst and pain are the ones which can push us to grow, and bring us to new life.

As the great Anthony de Mello once observed, "Every painful event contains in itself a seed of growth and liberation" (The Way to Love, 1991: p.118).

Remember those challenging and painful situations, events, relationships, or people in your life?

What are the feelings that these painful thing arouse in you?

Anxiety, insecurity, fear, jealousy, anger, guilt?

Now ask yourself this most crucial question: what does this feeling say about yourself? Remember: no other person, and no set of circumstances, can EVER make you feel in any particular way!

Everything that you experience goes through your own spiritual filter, and THAT determines how your emotions respond.

Yes, I know that this is counter to what most of you have been told, but the truth is that YOU are in control of your emotions. You alone!

In a challenging situation, observe your own emotions – and learn the lesson that they are teaching you about yourself!

This is a basic and fundamental truth: growth in this life is only possible through stress and challenge.

Note, please: I did not say anxiety! Anxiety is one way that we respond to stress. But stress is absolutely essential to grow – whether that is in the physical realm, our mental state, in relationships, or even in our spiritual lives.

And the most soul-deadening thing that we can ever do is to pursue a life of comfort and ease, stress-free and casual.

This is a good message for graduates who are facing new challenges, new struggles, new stressors, AND new opportunities.

Perhaps – just perhaps - this is why those who are filled with the Holy Spirit consistently speak in such odd and surprising ways: Do not be afraid. Do not weep. Do not be anxious.

Perhaps it is because God is trying to teach us that stress and challenge is necessary, even when things look hopeless and cause us pain.

Perhaps God wants us to remember that we, in fact, are in control ONLY of how we respond to these situations.

Because the one thing that we MUST do IN this life – and WITH this one life that we have been given – is to grow, to become, to not EVER shrink back in fear but always to move forward in hope.

My friends: can YOU hear THAT message from the Holy Spirit this morning? Do not be afraid.

If you do, I cannot promise that the Lord will provide miraculously for all of your needs, and raise your dead ones to life again.

But I can promise that God will raise YOU to life again, that YOU will become more than you are today, and that you will never be alone. And that is good news. Amen.