

# The Widow's Sons

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## **1 Kings 17:17-24**

The son of the woman, the mistress of the house at Zarephath, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

## **Luke 7:11-17**

Soon after healing the centurion's slave, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave

him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

**T**hey wore camouflage trousers and black T-shirts with the word “REPENT” emblazoned across the chest in white letters. A dozen of them or more fanned out around the war memorial in the center of town.

I encountered these people awhile back while strolling through downtown Waterbury, Connecticut. The leader of the group brandished a bullhorn and summoned all of Waterbury – and, judging by the volume, most of central Connecticut – to repentance. “You’re sinners, all of you,” he shouted. “You’re going to hell unless you repent!” A few disheveled souls wandered past, but they paid scant attention. “Don’t ignore me,” the preacher taunted. “You’re all miserable wretches!”

Yes, I suppose he had us there. We’re all in pretty bad shape, the truth be told. Each of us has his own bundle of fears and sorrows. The tally of losses that make up our lives sometimes feels so onerous that we can barely continue.

In both the Gospel reading this morning and in the Old Testament lesson, we encounter widows who have lost their sons – their only sons. The natural order of things dictates that parents predecease their children. When that pattern doesn’t hold, when the generational sequence is disrupted by illness or accident or combat, the death of a child is the occasion for more than the usual mourning. I’m sure that all of us know families who have been visited by tragedies like this, perhaps some in this congregation. I cannot imagine the unspeakable sadness of losing a child.

Even more so for widows, who have already suffered the loss of their husbands. And in the ancient world, few people were more vulnerable than widows. They had no obvious source of income, no Medicare, no Social Security. Is it any wonder that Jesus repeatedly asks his followers to look after widows?

By the time we encounter the widows in today's readings their grief is palpable. "What have you against me, O man of God?" the widow in Zarephath demands of Elijah, who had been staying at the woman's home. "You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!"

No, the widow was wrong on that count. The boy's death was not because of the woman's sin. It is in the nature of life to cease. Dust to dust and all that. The particular tragedy here was not death itself but that the generational sequence had been abrogated. And it was not due to the woman's sin.

Elijah grabs the son, carries him upstairs and does the full-body slam. The crusty prophet may have had a tad too much garlic for lunch, but the boy responds.

Jesus watches the funeral cortege pass by and immediately tries to comfort the grieving widow. "Don't cry," he says, and although Luke doesn't record it, I suspect that Jesus threw his arm around the sobbing woman. Again, her suffering was not her fault. Whatever her inadequacies, they did not cause her son's death.

Both of these widows were grieving. They were bereft and forlorn, their lives in tatters, their hopes shredded. They were desperate for some good news, for some help out of their predicament.

Jesus responded – not with a bullhorn but with words of comfort and consolation. The Man of Sorrows dried her tears. Then he, like Elijah the prophet, acted on the widow's behalf.

**H**ow we might wish that Jesus would reverse the sting of death. But that doesn't happen very often, for death is the one appointment we all face, and the Almighty steps in only rarely to reconfigure the natural order. Jesus, however, offers comfort in the midst of our suffering and misery. Come unto me, he says, all you who are weary and heavy-laden. The widow who has lost her only son. The man passing his days alone in the nursing home. The mother wishing that her estranged daughter would pick up the phone. The adolescent with a congenital limp who cannot participate in playground games. A divorcee picking at her supper. Parents worried about their son's addiction and his inability to hold a job.

A younger sister tracing her brother's name in the etchings on the polished black granite of the Vietnam Memorial.

We all have our sorrows, of course. That's part of being human. And one of the consequences of aging is that we carry with us the accumulation of our burdens, the disappointments and the failures of our lives. The sadness. The losses. Failed loves and broken marriages. Promotions denied and opportunities missed. And even, in that most tragic of circumstances, children lost.

But Jesus meets us in our sorrow. Come unto me, he says. I'll give you rest. Don't cry. For the grieving widow, that was good news. Someone understood her suffering. He stopped and provided comfort – and assured her that her loss was not a consequence of her sin, for who among us would not be beset with calamity if that were the case?

**T**here is yet another intriguing parallel in the Old and New Testament readings this morning. In both cases, the news traveled quickly. “Now I know that you are a man of God,” the widow from Zarephath told Elijah. Luke tells us that word about Jesus “spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.”

How could you keep something like this to yourself? It's good news! And when you are touched by Jesus, it's impossible to remain quiet. Good news like this is too precious to keep to yourself.

The camouflage preacher I heard that day claimed to be preaching the gospel, the good news of Jesus. But I heard no good news in his declamations. Instead, he sounded angry, eager to remind all of us within earshot about our sins. I didn't hear much that I could reckon as good news on the square in Waterbury. I heard judgment and condemnation instead.

I'm sure the preacher thought he was preaching the gospel, but I've come to recognize that if I can't detect good news embedded somewhere in the message, then I'm not hearing the gospel. The widow in Zarephath, fearing that her own sins had brought about the death of her son, wanted some good news. So too with the widow Jesus encountered.

And so it is with us.

In the midst of our despair, in the depth of our suffering, Jesus, the Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief, takes our sad, broken lives and somehow, through the miracle of grace, makes us whole. That's the gospel, the good news I was straining to hear amid all the shouting on the village square. Jesus wipes our tears and makes us whole.

And that sounds like good news to me. Very good news indeed.

Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Church of the Holy Faith  
Santa Fe, New Mexico  
June 10, 2007

Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Christ Church  
Middle Haddam, Connecticut  
June 6, 2010