

“Do Not Weep”
Based on I Kings 17: 8-24 and Luke 7: 11-17
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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It’s not easy being a 21st century Christian. We read these stories of miraculous healings and we wonder, why not us? Sure, most of us know someone who has narrowly escaped a car crash for which the only explanation is that the hand of God intervened. Many of us know someone who survived when the doctors told them they would not. We have anecdotal evidence of miracles but even so... it never seems to happen like it happens in the Bible.

What we have in today’s scriptures are three miracles. In the Hebrew Scriptures we have God sending Elijah to a destitute widow. There’s a famine across the land and God tells Elijah that he’s commanded the widow to feed him, but it appears the widow didn’t get the memo. When Elijah asks her for bread, she says, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”¹ You’d think God would have chosen someone of some means for Elijah to mooch off of. But Elijah doesn’t flinch. He tells her “Do not be afraid.” Make me a cake, then make cakes for yourself and your son for God will not let you run out of food as long as the famine lasts. So the widow does as Elijah says and sure enough, the jar of meal and the jug of oil do not run out.

It seems that Elijah stays on with the widow and her son for quite a while, as well he should what with the never ending supply of food and oil. But then one day the son becomes very ill. The widow apparently forgets the good fortune that Elijah brought and the fact that she would have died of starvation long ago if he hadn’t come along, and she blames Elijah for her son’s illness. She knows that he is a man of God and thinks that having him in her house brought God’s attention to her and God recognized her sinfulness and now this is the result. The Elijah passes the blame on to God—why have you done this to this widow? Repaying her kindness to me by killing her son? Then Elijah stretched himself upon the child three times while praying to God to heal him. God hears Elijah’s prayer and the child is brought back to life and brought back to his mother.

In our gospel lesson, we find a very similar story. Jesus is travelling through the town of Nain and comes upon a funeral procession. A widow is burying her only son. Jesus is overcome with compassion for the woman, tells her “do not weep” and then touches the funeral bier and says, “You man, I say to you, rise” and he does. And Jesus gives him back to his mother.

We’re used to Jesus healing people because of their faith. But the widow of Nain hasn’t done anything to show her faith. She doesn’t ask Jesus for anything. She doesn’t talk to him at all. And the widow of Sidon doesn’t show any particular faith either. She immediately blames Elijah for her son’s illness. What is God up to here? Why choose a poor, foreign widow to feed Elijah? Why save her in the process of saving Elijah? Why resuscitate the widow of Nain’s son?

Both of these women face more than the painful situation of losing their only child, one of the worst things that can happen to a parent. In addition to losing their only sons, they are losing their only shred of hope for security and financial well-being. As women in Biblical times, they required a male relative, either father, husband or son, to take care of them financially. The widow of Sidon, though her son was still a child, would have some hope that he would grow up and be able to support her. The widow of Nain was most likely already being supported by her son. Without their sons, the widows’ situations would slip from precarious to destitute.

¹ 1 Kings 17:12

But for Jesus to heal the widow's son shouldn't strike us as so surprising. After all, earlier in Luke he even says, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon."² Jesus did not only come to share God's grace by comforting the suffering, feeding the hungry, and healing the sick, he came to do so for the foreigners, for those who were even lower than low in the eyes of Jewish society.

And when Jesus sees the funeral procession he is overwhelmed by compassion. The Greek word is deeper than mere compassion; it is an intense sympathy that accompanies mercy. He tells the widow, "do not weep." And in any other circumstances, to tell a mother not to weep when while burying her child, would be insensitive at best. But in this case, Jesus tells her not to weep because he knows that shortly, she will have no reason to weep for her son will be restored to her.

In both stories, we see God's compassion for those with nowhere to turn. God's compassion is for the widow, the orphan, the destitute, the voiceless. God's ways are not the world's ways. In the ways of the world, the widow of Sidon and her son would have died of starvation, and if not, the son would have died of his illness. In the ways of the world, the widow of Nain would have buried her son and gone on to her destitute life. But the ways of God are different. The ways of God are the ways of healing and wholeness, life and compassion. In these stories, God shows compassion for the lowest in society, widows with no means of support, with no money, no power.

Pastor Jim Hopkins tells of Rufus Watson, who loved the story of Elijah and the widow of Sidon. Hopkins writes:

"Rufus, who lived to be ninety-nine years old, was born in Texas, the son of former slaves. He served his country in the military. He pitched in the Negro professional leagues. He made some money investing in real estate. He witnessed lynchings and spent a lifetime wondering how people commit such atrocities and still go to church and call themselves Christians.

"He found comfort in the story of Elijah and the widow. He said if his life was not proof enough, this story showed that God meets people at the bottom of the barrel. 'That's where God meets us, Jim, at the bottom of the barrel. God meets us when we've gone so low that all we can do is look up.' If Rufus trusted God to meet him at life's low points, if Elijah trusted God to meet him at life's low points, if God met Elijah and the widow at the point where the grain, oil, and rain were running out, I guess we are well advised to do the same."³

Sometimes it's hard to face situations that we know will evoke our intense compassion and call us to acts of mercy. Sometimes we feel helpless and it seems easier to turn away than to pay attention to what's really going on. I find this to be particularly true for myself when it comes to certain current events. For example, I don't follow the events with the oil spill in the Gulf very closely. I read the headlines, "top hat attempted," "top hat failed," "top kill attempted," "top kill failed," "x, y and z attempted," "x, y, and z failed;" but I don't read the details. I know it's bad. I know there's nothing I can do about it, so I'd rather not know exactly what's going on.

But I was brought to my senses a couple days ago when I read a friend's post on Facebook, "I accept my share of the oil spill blame. My lifestyle and political acquiescence didn't help stop this." This confession combined with a photo and an article made me rethink my presumed innocence. The photo (see end) was shockingly terrible of a bird covered in so much brown sludge that I might not have realized there even was a bird in there if the photo hadn't been labeled. The article titled, "A

² Luke 4:24-26

³ H. James Hopkins, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 103.

Time for Moral Reckoning” by the progressive evangelical Jim Wallis, sat in my e-mail inbox unread where it would remain today if someone hadn’t re-sent to it me, bringing it to my attention, and encouraging me to read it.

I have to admit when this spill started I thought that the silver lining might be a re-thinking of “drill baby drill.” I thought maybe we can re-focus on alternative energy sources that, while not entirely out of the picture, haven’t been at the forefront of development. Rather than finding ways to get away from oil altogether, we’re finding more and more risky ways to suck out of the earth what little oil is left. But I hadn’t taken a long hard look at my own responsibility in the matter. I don’t think much about my use of oil. I figure I drive a hybrid car so I’m already conserving. I’ve done my share. But is that really enough? I don’t think twice about how far or how often I drive. In addition to gas for autos, plastic bottles represent a large percentage of our oil consumption as they require a significant amount of petroleum to produce. I don’t use much plastic, and when I do, I recycle. But is that really enough? How has my thirst for oil contributed to this disaster?

In his article Jim Wallis addresses the oil catastrophe writing:

“Theologically, we are witnessing a massive despoiling of God’s creation. We were meant to be stewards of the Gulf of Mexico, the wetlands that protect and spawn life, the islands and beaches, and all of God’s creatures who inhabit the marine world. But instead, we are watching the destruction of all that. Why? Because of the greed for profits; because of deception and lies; because of both private and public irresponsibility. And at the root, because of an ethic of endless economic growth, fueled by carbon-based fossil fuels, that is ultimately unsustainable and unstable....

“Almost everyone now apparently agrees with the new direction of a “clean energy economy.” And we know that will require a re-wiring of the energy grid.... But it will also require a [re-wiring of ourselves](#) -- our demands, requirements, and insatiable desires. [Our oil addiction has led us to environmental destruction](#), endless wars, and the sacrifice of young lives, and it has put our very souls in jeopardy. *New York Times* columnist Tom Freidman recently wondered about the deeper meaning of the Great Recession when he asked, ‘What if it’s telling us that the whole growth model we created over the last fifty years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall -- when Mother Nature and the market both said, ‘No More.’” The Great Spill makes the point even more.”⁴

In light of today’s scriptures, it occurs to me that there are many widows in this situation. Of course, there are the literal widows, the wives of the men killed in the explosion on the oil platform that started it all. But they aren’t alone. Additionally, voiceless, unprotected with nowhere to turn is the Earth herself, and all her children: the fish, the birds, the fragile ecosystem, and those whose livelihoods depend on the health of the Gulf Coast, those dependent on tourism, those who have fished these waters for generations and know no other way of life now face the very real possibility of losing it all for years, maybe even permanently.

It’s easy to blame BP, Transocean and Halliburton—even while they blame each other. It’s true that they are the most immediately at fault, but what role do we as individuals and as a society have in this? They wouldn’t have been drilling that oil if we hadn’t demanded it. The oil is on our hands, too. It’s not enough to hope and pray for a miracle while turning a blind eye to our own responsibility. Will this oil catastrophe be our low point that brings us to our senses and brings us to open ourselves to meet God and allow God to change us? Wouldn’t that be a miracle?

⁴ Jim Wallis, “A Time for Moral Reckoning,” 06/03/10
<http://blog.sojo.net/2010/06/03/a-time-for-moral-reckoning/>

We need a miracle to stop this disaster. We need a miracle to clean up the mess. We need a miracle to get away from our oil dependence. Where is the Good News? The Good News is God is in the miracle business. God sides with the widow. God sides with the poor, the sick and the downtrodden. God meets us, even in our lowest lows, perhaps especially in our lowest lows. Despite everything, God has compassion for us and for those in even more need of compassion than we. God tells us, “do not be afraid.” God tells us “Do not weep.”

