

June 6, 2004
I Kings 17:8-24, Luke 7: 11-17
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"Divine Disruptions"

Nine years ago my family and I visited the beaches of Normandy, France, where the allied forces began their D-Day invasion of Europe during the Second World War. A French guide drove us in a small van all over the countryside and to the beaches. He talked with one hand, pointed with the other, and used his knees to keep the van more or less on the road.

Nothing I had learned in school about D-Day and WWII prepared me for the emotional impact of what we saw. On Omaha beach we looked up at what remained of the German pillboxes and fortifications. We tried to imagine what it would have been like to have been 19 years old and to have stared death in the face and have faced constant fire and the impossible assault of that steep hill. Then we saw the immaculately kept green grass of the American cemetery with the endless rows of crosses and the trees lining the cliff edge above the sea. We were overcome with emotion. From the beach to the cemetery, we could sense the fear, the courage, the horror, the sacrifice and the persistence of the allied forces that day. I will never forget that visit. Today we celebrate the 60th anniversary of D-Day, the event that turned the tide of the war and led to the ultimate defeat of the Nazi terror. Today we honor the memory of those who struggled there. I will never take for granted the sacrifice of those who gave their lives for the liberation of Europe and Asia.

War and human suffering, twisted metal and broken lives, disease and oppression, evil and despair raise the questions, "Where is God in the midst of suffering?" and "What is God doing about suffering?" It is not only the war in Iraq or global issues of hunger, justice, poverty, and the environment that raise the question of God's presence and God's power in our world. The personal hardships and tragedies closer to home, facing our families, friends and our own lives lead us to wonder and to question God. When you are ten years from retirement, have lost your job, have a family to support, and feel you do not have the skills you need for today's market, you question God. When your spouse has betrayed you and you are full of anger and fear, you question God. When your child falls terribly sick and dies in the midst of the fullness of life, you question God. You question not only God's presence in your pain, but also what God is doing to overcome or heal your pain.

In the time of Elijah, a poor widow of Zarephath and her son barely survive a terrible famine only to have the son fall sick and die. She feels that she is cursed and despised by God. When the prophet Elijah comes, she believes that he will declare that her son has died because of her sin. Is it too much to say that God has become to her a blaming, vengeful God who inflicts misery and causes suffering? No one can do anything for her. She wants the prophet to leave.

Read in the light of Elijah's miracle, this story from Luke's gospel sounds strangely familiar. Another widow has lost her only son. He is no small child but a young man. They carry him out of the town for burial. The mother is silent. In despair, she asks nothing of Jesus. She weeps because there is nothing anyone can do to take away her pain and restore her son. Jesus has compassion on her. Telling her not to weep, he touches the bier and tells the young man to rise. The young man gets up and speaks. Luke carefully notes the reaction of the crowd, "A great prophet has risen among us! God has looked favorably on his people!" In Jesus, God is fulfilling the promise he made that God would raise up a new prophet like Moses.

What is going on here? Two widows. Two sons. Two prophets.

These stories point to the death and resurrection of the young man Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is a divine disruption in the all too familiar pattern of suffering and death. We look at these stories through the lens of the resurrection of Jesus. They tell us that divine disruptions are happening all the time. God is a god of compassion who is not only present with us in our pain, but is transforming our pain in the power of the resurrection. Only Jesus can say, "Do not weep," because he knows that the day will come when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. These stories are told to awaken us to the truth that the resurrection is not only what happens at the end of life, but resurrection happens now in the midst of life. There are moments of resurrected life, divine disruptions, breaking out all the time in a world of pain and death. The Bible deals very realistically with the presence of human suffering, anger, despair, trouble and death. The message of the Bible is that life does not end in despair but in hope, not in brokenness but healing, and not in death but life. The widow of Zarephath learns that the Lord is not a god of cruel indifference and vengeful spite. The widow of Nain learns that God banishes despair in the resurrection power of Jesus.

For many months, we have prayed for peace and justice in Iraq. We have prayed for those whose lives have been disrupted by war; we have prayed for our leaders, our soldiers, our friends and loved ones who have been and are deployed, and we have prayed for the people of Iraq. We have faced the terrible moral ambiguity and destruction of war. We have wondered where we see the Risen Lord in all the fear, terror and death. One image from the desert will remain in my mind as a picture of hope and life. It was the image of an Iraqi prisoner on his knees beside an American soldier. The soldier was pouring water from his canteen into the parched mouth of the Iraqi. The soldier's hand was on the prisoner's soldier. It was an image of life in a world of death, of compassion in a time of war. It was an image of the presence and power of Jesus.

We, as God's resurrected people, are signs of what God is doing to transform the world. The gospel is not about making life a little bit better for folks; it is about dying and rising with Christ. The church is not an organization whose purpose is to add a bit of zest to life; the church is about living a whole new life in Christ.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, the writer Anne Lamont tells of the little, run down St. Andrew Presbyterian Church that became a spiritual home to her. One Sunday morning at the flea market, Lamont was strung out on drugs, addicted to alcohol and pregnant when she heard the sound of hymn singing pouring from the tiny church. She listened at a distance to the soothing sounds. Another day she stopped in the doorway to hear the singing. Bit by bit she edged into the church, first sitting by herself in a folding chair, and then gradually moving closer to the thirty odd folks, mostly women, who worshipped there. She always left before the sermon. Even when she tried to keep the folks at a distance, they welcomed her. The message got through. She began to feel as if Jesus was following her around like a stray cat you don't want to let in the house. Then one day she surrendered. You might say she died and was resurrected. She threw away her pills and poured out her alcohol. Through the love and care of the poor of that small congregation she began a new life. Lamont writes, "When I was at the end of my rope, the people of St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on" (*Traveling Mercies*, Pantheon Books: New York, 1999, p. 100).

In our life together in the church, we are a part of God's invasion of a dying world with the gift of new life. The elders we ordain and install today are called to a ministry that disrupts the despair, indifference, injustice of the world with the hope, the passion and the justice of God. A church that is alive in Christ is a church that is sending children like those in our Chamber Choir to sing at the Give the Kids a World Foundation, Make a Wish Foundation; making Bible School crafts a supplies for a Bible school our members will lead in Mexico, sending graduating high school youth to study the Pauline roots of their faith in Greece, Turkey and Rome; welcoming new members; encouraging children to read the Bible; comforting the grieving with the promises of the gospel; and serving in the community. As we dedicate our pledges today to this new building program for our church, we are dedicating ourselves to be a resurrection people.

Where is God and what is God doing? God is here with us disrupting all the ways in which we die with the overwhelming power of resurrected life.