

“Decisively Different”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
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Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "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." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah. After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, 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." (1 Kings 17:8-24)

Soon afterwards he 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. (Luke 7:11-17)

It was a time of great trouble. There was not a drop of dew or rain for years. Nothing grew in the fields. The brooks dried up. Our story begins with God giving Elijah an instruction: *“Go now to Zarephath. I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”*

An odd instruction, isn't it? Yet, Elijah got up and went. As he came to the entrance of the village, he met a woman, a widow, gathering firewood. He asked her, *"Please, would you bring me a little water in a jug? I need a drink."* As she went to get it, he called out, *"And while you're at it, would you bring me something to eat?"*

And she answered, *"I am sorry, but I don't have so much as a biscuit. All I have is a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we'll die."*

And Elijah said to her, *"Don't worry about anything. Go ahead and do what you said. But first, make a small biscuit for me and bring it here."*

An odd request, isn't it? Yet, the poor widow, a single mom, with problems of her own, went right off and did what Elijah asked. She willingly offered hospitality to a stranger.

From that day on, the jar of meal did not run out and the bottle of oil did not become empty. Every day, Elijah, and the widow, and her son shared their daily meal together. Every day, they were reminded that God could be trusted for another day. And every day their faith grew.

Yet, later on, the widow's son became sick. Then, the sickness took a turn for the worse, and he stopped breathing. The widow said to Elijah, *"Why did you ever show up here in the first place—a holy man barging in, exposing my sins, and killing my son?"* She must have thought that God killed her son as a punishment for something wrong she had done, and that Elijah had something to do with it, that he brought death rather than life with him.

You see? She had almost given up. She was on the brink of starving to death. And with Elijah's coming, she had just started to have hope again. She had just started to live again. Yet, the worst thing imaginable happened. Not only the widow, but I imagine that the prophet himself was also very upset, very disturbed. The sound of his prayers, as well as his gestures toward the dead boy, is quite challenging, even provocative. But most importantly, the prophet trusts that God can put breath back into the child's body. Death may seem to have called the shots. Chaos may seem to control the situation. Life may seem irreparably broken and shattered. Yet, the prophet trusts that God can enter the scene and break open a new life, which God does.

What a beautiful and amazing story! There are all kinds of wonderful things swirling around in this story: the generosity that transforms the direst of situations; the blessings of God multiplying in unexpected and unimagined ways; the rains of mercy reviving dried-up lives; the miracle of grace turning scarcity into abundance, despair into hope, death into life.

The setting may not be exactly the same, but in our Gospel lesson today, we have another story of God breaking open a new life. Entering a town called Nain, Jesus encounters a funeral procession and sees a bereaved mother, a poor widow, wailing. Moved with compassion, Jesus raises the dead young man to life and gives him back to his mother.

My friends, this is what our faith is about. Our God enters into our world, touches our most pain-filled places, and restores our shattered lives. Our God steps into the chaos of our unpredictable, overturned, or broken world to bring meaning, purpose, and direction. Yes, our faith is about this God who breaks open a decisively different world. We, the Christians, are a people who follow this decisively different way of thinking and acting. We, the Christians, are a people infused with this decisively different power, the power that raises the dead.

Come on, my friends. We do not need to cling to an old world and its outdated repertoire of small solutions. An exciting and decisively different life is waiting for us. Today, Jesus says to us, "Rise," and breaks open a new life! And all God's people say, AMEN!