

The Living and the Dead

In the name of Him who is the Lord of life and the conqueror of death, dear friends in Christ: It's easy to see the connection between today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons: in both accounts, there is someone – the only son of a widow – who has died, and he is brought back to life again.

There are, however, significant differences in the accounts. In the first, Elijah is God's prophet through whom the Lord gives life to the son who is dead. And there's a fairly elaborate ritual involved: taking the boy upstairs to the prophet's own room, laying him down on the bed, stretching out over him three times, and crying out to the Lord in fervent prayer. In the Gospel, Jesus gives life directly to the young man who has died. There's not much to it: he walks up, halts the funeral procession, touches the bier on which the body is being carried, and says, "Get up." And it's done. And what's being emphasized is that Elijah is merely a human agent through whom the Lord grants life, while Jesus himself *is* the Lord and giver of life.

We can take it a step farther, too. It turns out that the process whereby Elijah raises the boy who's died prophetically illustrates the work of Christ. First you've got the bereaved mother, who is a Gentile woman, not one of God's people Israel. She understands the death of her son as punishment for her many sins, for until she met Elijah she'd been an idol worshipping pagan. Thus she bears a heavy burden of guilt and fears God's judgment – and she sees her son's death as part of it. But then Elijah, who trusts in the Lord's mercy and forgiveness, takes the dead child from her. And here we have to see Elijah as sort of a Christ figure. He takes the boy up with him as he ascends the stairs, as Christ takes us up in himself when he ascends the cross. He lays the boy on his bed, as we through Baptism are buried with Christ and laid with him in his tomb – the place where he sleeps the sleep of death. And then Elijah covers the boy with his own body. It's a picture of the atonement: how our sins are covered by Christ; how when God looks at us he doesn't see us and our sins; he sees Jesus, his Son, who is righteous. That Elijah does this three times suggests the three days Christ is in the tomb. And *then* the boy is raised to life – just like we are raised to life with Jesus. So, Jesus himself commands the power of life; and Elijah, through his actions, demonstrates the work of Christ by which he grants life to us.

As both accounts continue, then, the formerly dead youths are returned to their mothers, which is the cause of much rejoicing, and the giving of praise and glory to God. I daresay that in the case of the widow in the first account, there is also an implied absolution. That her son has been given life again would be understood by her to mean that the Lord had forgiven her sins, and thus she had all the more reason to rejoice and place her trust in the one true Living God.

They really are wonderful, these two accounts, these two resurrections, these two mighty miracles that show us the mission and ministry of Jesus our Savior to grant life ... but they aren't what I want to talk about this morning. Instead I'd like to direct your attention to today's Epistle that speaks of another mighty miracle of the Lord giving life to someone who is dead that we might otherwise have overlooked. You see, the chief thing that the two accounts we've been discussing so far have in common is this: they both deal with someone who is obviously dead. The breath is gone. The body is cold. And anyone looking at Paul as he describes himself and his former way of life under Judaism would have said he was very much alive. Indeed, he was living the kind of life that most of his contemporaries would have envied:

“I wish I had it all together like that guy: so zealous for the Lord, so eager to please him, so godly and righteous, so committed to keeping the God’s commands.”

At the time, Paul would have said the same thing about himself: that he was living the best life humanly possible. But now, as he writes to the Christians in Galatia, he knows better. He knows that then he was dead, as dead as could be – merely an animated corpse; or as Jesus said it: “a white washed tomb” – looking clean and tidy on the outside, but inside filled with the corruption and decay of death.

For Paul had been a Pharisee, one of the super-orthodox hardliners of the Jewish faith, who scrupulously tried to keep and obey all the commandments of God – and not just God’s commands; but also a long list of extra requirements and traditions they tacked on to make sure that they never even got close to breaking a commandment. And among the Pharisees, Paul was a fanatic. If their rules required spending two hours a day in prayer and Bible study, Paul spent five. If on the Sabbath to keep from working the Rabbis said you couldn’t lift and carry anything weighing over five pounds, Paul made sure he didn’t lift anything over eighteen ounces. He was obsessed with doing it right. He was determined to live in such a way that the Lord could find no fault in him.

And he was also determined to defend the honor of the Lord, his holy Law, and this righteous way of life he’d chosen against any and all who would oppose it, which is why he hated with pure passion the growing cult of Christianity: those unholy heretics with their crucified Messiah, their calls for everyone to repent (even Pharisees, can you imagine?), and their silly notion of being reckoned righteous by faith in Jesus and not by perfect obedience to God’s Law. And sadly, it seemed that every day more gullible people were buying into it. Poor suckers were being tricked into believing it. Many Jews – God’s chosen people – were being led astray. It had to be stopped. It had to be destroyed.

Thus Paul began viciously persecuting Christians. He saw to it that they were arrested, beaten, their property confiscated, their homes destroyed. And so doing, he saw himself as a crusader for God’s truth and righteousness – which in turn was another feather in his cap: Defender of the True Faith, Servant and Sword of God Almighty. When later he discovered that many of Jerusalem’s Christians had fled to the city of Damascus to avoid the terrors he was unleashing upon them, he went to the High Priest who gave him written authority to go there, round them up, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. And Paul was so certain that he was absolutely one-hundred-percent in the right – that he was fulfilling God’s will – that as he crested a hill and saw the city of Damascus come into view, he began calling down divine curses on the Christians there who would soon be in his prisoners.

But there was an upset in his plan, for that’s when he met the living Lord Jesus. Paul was suddenly enveloped in brilliant light from heaven. The awesome majesty of it made him fall on his face, trembling in fear. And then he heard a voice calling his name and asking, “Why are you persecuting me?” In terror and confusion Paul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” And then he heard the answer he least expected and ultimately most feared, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Uh-oh.

I’ve sometimes wondered what those Muslim terrorists who strap on bombs and blow themselves up along with dozens of innocent bystanders experience when, in the moments after they commit their horrendous crimes, they meet their Maker. They are expecting to be

richly rewarded by their god Allah for their faithful service. Instead they meet Jesus who is, I think it's safe to say, less than pleased with them. Can you imagine the shock, the sudden realization that everything I thought and so firmly believed in was a lie? That's what Paul experienced on the outskirts of Damascus. And fire-breathing legalist that Paul was, he knew he could only expect one outcome of this unhappy encounter: his instant death and eternal damnation.

But as it turns out, he was wrong even about that. To his utter astonishment – and immense relief – Paul discovered that the Lord Jesus had a different plan in mind; not to destroy him as he so richly deserved, but rather to use him as both an example and a messenger of his grace and forgiveness. And Paul discovered a whole lot more than that. First, he found that he never really knew the Lord God. It seemed impossible. Paul was a great Bible scholar. He knew the Scriptures like the back of his hand; but the god he thought he knew was completely unlike the God who is there revealing himself in the pages of the sacred text. Paul's god – or rather the image of god he had created – was up high and exalted. He punished sinners and only rewarded the just. He had to be climbed up to rung by rung on a ladder of good works and holy living. But Paul came to see that the true God is loving and merciful. And though high and exalted, he descends, he comes down to earth; he comes and humbles himself to serve and to save sinners – yes, even by his death on the cross.

And that's something else Paul discovered: that he was a sinner. Not just his persecution of Christians; but all his supposedly righteous deeds and his meticulous attention to the Law – there wasn't anything good he was achieving in all that. It was only pride: sinful, self-serving, self-aggrandizing, self-deceptive pride. It was the exact opposite of godly, self-sacrificing love. Paul discovered that the path he had been on, the path that he believed led to life, was in fact the way of death: living death in time and eternal death in hell.

This is why he writes with such passion to the Christians at Galatia. In fulfillment of God's plan for him, to be an Apostle to carry the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus to the Gentiles, Paul had preached the Good News to them. And by the working of the Holy Spirit, many came to faith in Christ. Thus Paul founded several congregations throughout the region of Galatia, which today is in south central Turkey. But after Paul left there to carry the Gospel on to other places, there came along a group of false teachers. They were Judaizing Christians who taught that to be truly righteous in the sight of God and to be assured of his salvation, there must added to faith in Jesus a long list of Jewish laws and traditions. They encouraged the Galatians to adopt and carefully obey these practices, and so prove their faith and guarantee their place in God's kingdom. Furthermore, these false teachers were discrediting Paul. They said that he wasn't a real Apostle. He wasn't one of the original twelve. He didn't follow Jesus when he walked the earth, never heard him speak, most likely never even saw him. "So what does Paul know? You can't trust him. And the proof of it is that he never taught you to follow all these good Jewish rules that we're teaching you."

But Paul saw what they were up to. They were teaching the Christian version of how to be a Pharisee, that is, someone who trusts in what he does to please God rather than in what Christ has done to save him. Or, to say it another way, they were teaching the Galatians to turn from the path of life in Christ he had taught them to the way of living death. Paul had walked that road. He knew how deceptively attractive it was. So it is that he warns the Galatians of the danger they are in if they start down that path. And he reminds them too that he is a legitimate Apostle. No, it's true, he didn't believe in Jesus when he was doing his earthly ministry. And yes, he persecuted the Church. "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach

him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.”

For three long years Paul laid low. And what did he do during that time? He restudied the Holy Scriptures that he already knew quite well; the difference was that now he was seeing it in the Light of Christ and the truth of the Gospel. Before when he read the Scriptures he was dead; now in Christ he was alive. And yes, Jesus appeared to Paul briefly on the Damascus road; but Paul really got to know him – really came to see him and understand his saving work and amazing grace – by pouring over the Word of God. It’s funny: before being sent into the world, the original Apostles spent three years with Jesus, rarely understanding anything he was saying and doing. Paul – the last Apostle – spent three years with Jesus in Holy Scripture already knowing and trusting the truth of his mission to save a world of sinners by his death and resurrection. Then he too went into the world to preach the Good News.

And just as through Elijah the Lord brought life to a boy who had died, now through Paul and his ministry the Lord was making alive many, turning them from the living death of lost paganism on one hand and prideful legalism on the other to eternal life through faith in Christ.

And the two points I want you to walk away with today are these: first that the latter is the far more important and more powerful miracle – even if it’s not as visually spectacular. Elijah raised a boy who eventually died again; but through Paul’s preaching and teaching the Lord gave eternal life to untold multitudes who were dead in sin and unbelief. Second, this miracle continues among us today through the ministry of the Church whereby Christ our Lord reveals himself and his saving work in his proclaimed and rightly taught Word and his Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. By these means of communicating his grace and delivering the power of his Spirit, we have been called from death and given life through faith in Jesus. And it’s by continuing to receive these gifts of God’s grace that we are kept in saving faith and guarded from being led astray – back down the path that leads to death.

Seeing the miracle of Jesus raising a young man to life, the people of Nain glorified God and cried out, “God has visited his people”. Friends, each week God visits us here to perform the even greater miracle of giving us life eternal in Christ. Therefore all the more let us give glory to God for the life he gives us in his Son, and gladly receive the gifts of grace and forgiveness he offers to us here. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!