

Easter: The Prequel

1 Kings 17:17-24

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 7:11-17

June 5, 2016 Pentecost 3 C

I remember that back in 1977, when the original Star Wars movie came out, we took our daughter Heather to it. She was a preschooler then, and it was her first movie, and we didn't know how it would work out. She sat at the edge of her seat, enchanted. We enjoyed the sequels, too. But then George Lucas decided to tell us the backstory, so he had a series of 3 prequels which weren't so enjoyable. That was the first that I heard the word prequel, which is like a sequel, except that it's the story that comes before. Now they're back on track with Star Wars: The Force Awakens, which takes place a generation after the original movie, which was number 4. When George Lucas was in Kindergarten, he must have learned to count, 4,5,6,1,2,3,7.

So the prequel is a back story, told to help you understand the main story. I thought about how that term fits when I read the two stories of resurrection that you heard earlier this morning. So, if you saw the word "Easter" on the bulletin cover and as part of my sermon title, and you thought that I was pulling out an old Easter sermon to rerun, it's not true. In the season of Pentecost, we learn more about the power of the risen Christ within the church. And these two scriptures set the context for that by giving us two prequels to the big resurrection story.

They are two separate stories from two separate eras, 900 years apart, but they have one thing in common—God pops in to bring new life where before there had only been death. The first story is set back in the time of Elijah, like last week's story, when Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was ruled by Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel. The "bel" in Jezebel's name was in honor of "Baal" for she worshiped Baal, the Philistine storm god, who supposedly brought rain to nourish the crops. Not only did Jezebel worship Baal, but she tried to squeeze out Israel's God by making her pagan belief the official state religion. The prophet Elijah's name means "Yahweh is my God," and he lived out his name. Elijah came out of the wilderness and proclaimed that God, Yahweh, was shutting down the rains. For God to exercise such control over the weather was a direct insult and challenge to the power of the so-called rain god Baal, and to the government. And worse yet, it worked. The nation dried up. It was a rain embargo. This was the same drought that I mentioned last Sunday, but earlier in the story, before the showdown at the Mount Carmel corral.

Drought doesn't respect boundary lines. Famine and suffering spread beyond the borders of Israel. It affected everybody. Elijah was a wanted man—he would have had his picture on the post office wall if only they had pictures and post offices back then. Seeking to stay out of the clutches of the Queen,

Elijah traveled to Zaraphath, a town in the neighboring land of Sidon. There he approached a widow who was scrawny and stooped from starvation, carrying a listless, dying child. Elijah asked her, "Give me your food and your water." Astonishing! This stranger, this Israelite, expected her to give him her last meal, the only food that stood between her and her child and starvation. But Elijah made a promise. "For thus says the God of Israel: 'the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that God sends rain on the earth.'" She accepted and Elijah stayed with them, sharing their food.

Amazingly, she believed the prophet and followed his instructions. Day after day, she dipped into her meager provisions, and they never ran out, and they had enough to eat during the famine. If the story ended here, we would know about a confident prophet and a sincere and faithful woman and her son. But their certainty and faith would soon be challenged to the core.

Suddenly, the woman's son grew sick and died. The woman became bitter. "What have I done to you to deserve this? I thought that you were God's prophet. Did you cause my son's death as a punishment for my own sins?" What a horrible mockery, she thought—to have their lives saved by this God of Israel, only to have the boy snatched away. Elijah was also bewildered by the death. It shook his faith to the core. He asked God, "Lord God, why did you do such a terrible thing to this woman? She's letting me stay here and now you've let her son die!" Elijah continued to pray with insistence and urgency. He could only depend upon God. He prayed three times, lying prostrate over the lifeless body, and called the boy's life back again. He picked up the limp boy and carried him downstairs. "Look! Your son is alive!" And the woman knew that Elijah was truly God's prophet, and that God truly cared. That story was the first of today's prequels to Easter. In the midst of death, God brought life. Wherever death is, there is God, creating new life.

Nine centuries later, the Gospel writer Luke would remember this story and weave it into his Gospel twice. First, he remembered it as he told of Jesus giving his inaugural sermon in Nazareth; the story of when Jesus almost incited the audience to riot by pointing out that God's mercy wasn't limited to people just like them. He said, "You can be sure that no prophets are liked by the people of their own hometown. Once during the time of Elijah, there was no rain for 3 ½ years, and people everywhere were starving. There were many widows in Israel, but Elijah was sent only to a widow in the town of Zaraphath near the city of Sidon." (unquote)

Jesus was showing them that God's outlook is always broader than ours; like the hymn goes, "there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." And later, in his Gospel Chapter 7, Luke tells the story we heard today. It also is set in a little village, this one perhaps near Bethlehem. Luke told the story in such a way that Jewish listeners would make the connection to

Elijah's story—"Oh, yes! That reminds me of..." because both stories involved prophets, and widows, and sons, and resurrection.

Jesus meets a widow at a city gate. Only this time, the widow's son has already died. His body is being carried outside of town on a stretcher for burial. How tragic it is when a parent has to bury their child, no matter what age! How much more tragic it was in that time, when a widow's livelihood, survival, even, might have depended upon her child! And how full of compassion was Jesus! Perhaps he touched her gently on the shoulder as he said, "Don't cry." Then, turning to the lifeless body, he said, "Young man, get up." And the young man sat up and started talking. Then Jesus reunited the son with his mother. Everyone was amazed, and gave glory to God. Who wouldn't be? Wherever death is, there is God, creating new life.

Both stories show God's compassion for the poor, the weak, the powerless people of the time; two widows who had virtually nothing, only their sons—sons who were their source of hope, the sign of promise, the dream that someday things would be better. And how dark it must have been for them when their sons died. Proverbs 13:12 says, "hope deferred makes a heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life." No wonder God felt compassion for those two widows, for their hope had not only been deferred, it had been crushed, as lifeless as their children. And when their children were restored to life, God's compassion fulfilled their desire.

Besides teaching us about God's compassion, the stories teach us that God doesn't give up easily; God doesn't give up when we might be ready to. God offers new life in the midst of death, new paths leading us away from despair and confusion, new hope that lightens our lives. That's the message of these two prequels of Easter, that's the message of Easter, and that's the message that God want us to hear. Be faithful.

The power of these stories for our lives is that they are reminders that God's love is stronger than death. "O death, where is your victory, O grave, where is your sting?" Paul sang in 1 Corinthians 15, taunting death, like Elijah taunted Baal on Mount Carmel. Death is real and its presence brings pain and sorrow to our lives. But life is more real, and in God's presence, life is everlasting. These prequels to Easter remind us that we worship a God who has overcome death, a God who gives us life forever. And that's a very good thing to remember. Amen.

by Michael Dixon