I Kings 17:17-24 **Two Widows** June 6, 2010
Luke 7:11-17 Pastor Dennis Plourde

Over this past week I have read and reread these two passages with the following question on my mind: How do I preach/teach on these two texts? As I continued to reflect on these and other passages it came to me that these two passages are exceptions and not the norm. Not the norm for Elijah and not the norm for Jesus. Not the norm for yesterday or for today.

Here we have two widows who have lost sons, centuries apart. Their stories are similar but also very different. They both have the same outcome: a son restored to life, but...

Elijah is not a stranger to the widow we meet in I Kings. Elijah first met her when he was hungry and searching for food. It was during a time of famine in the country and she was gathering some firewood to prepare what she foresaw as the last meal for herself and her son. She had just enough flour and oil for one more loaf of bread that they would share as one last meal: *"I don't have any bread only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it – and die"* (I Kings 17:11). Elijah assures her that the flour and oil will not run out during the time of the famine. She follows Elijah's instructions, and the oil and flour last. Time passes and now her son is sick and dies. Elijah takes her son, prays and her son lives. Elijah's prayer is answered (v.22). The woman is now convinced of Elijah's power and that his word is the very word of God.

As we move to the text in Luke we find Jesus coming into the town of Nain. Luke says that there is a large crowd following Jesus and as they begin to enter the city, at the town gate, they meet a funeral procession. A widow is burying her only son. They are probably unaware of Jesus' presence. They are caught up in their grief and a large crowd from the town is with her. Jesus is moved by her grief. He goes up to the bier, touches it (he is now unclean in the eyes of many) and speaks to the young man. The man rises, begins talking and, like Elijah, Jesus gives the son back to his mother. The whole situation is one of unbelief and word of this "miracle" is spread throughout Judea. *"God has come to help his people" (Luke 7:17).*

What are we to make of these two stories in 2010?

These stories, these miracles, are exceptions to the norm. They are not the norm for Elijah or Jesus. Now, we may want them to be the norm. There are some who may even teach that if we just have enough faith or trust in God this can be the norm. However, as one studies Scriptures one discovers that these two stories are the exception and not the rule. Many others who had contact with Elijah or Jesus died. In fact, eventually these two sons will die. The only one in these stories who did not die was Elijah (II Kings 2).

These two sons are not raised because of their faith or the faith of their mothers. In Elijah's case the mother is upset with Elijah, *"Did you come to remind me of my sin, and kill my son" (17:19b)?* She has no expectation of Elijah being able to do anything. The widow in Nain may or may not have heard about Jesus. She is caught up in her grief. They are on their way to the cemetery. There is no expectation of life being restored. We do not even know the extent of

her faith. God moves beyond human understanding and expectation – these are the exceptions and not the norm of life. Any explanation is insufficient.

They come as a reminder to us that life is messy at best. We get sick. We go hungry. We often hurt and are in pain. We die. Faithful people get sick. People of great faith die way too young. Wars come and the innocent are often the ones caught in the middle. We are pushed some days to the very edge of faith. It is not because we have a lack of faith or trust. We don't come to life or faith with all the answers. Life and faith are often messy and unpredictable. The promise of God is not for a smooth ride but of God's presence with us through the ride. It is God's promise to be with us even during the days when the valley is deep and dark.

Yet, we long for answers. We want the exceptions to be the norm. But they are only exceptions. We need to rejoice and celebrate when they do come. We need to tell the stories as God's exceptions and not the norm of God's actions in the world. We cannot make them God's modus operandi. God does not promise the road of life will be smooth, nor life not messy and often chaotic.

We live life in the midst of the complex world. Today we woke to another day of oil spilling into the Gulf of Mexico. We see the images of oil-soaked birds and the fragile ecology of the region in danger of being destroyed. Yesterday a tornado went through a portion of Ohio, killing at least five and destroying over 50 homes. Life is messy and chaotic. The devastation can be blamed on _____ (you fill in the blank).

Our texts today tell of two widows, who find hope and restoration in the midst of the chaos of their lives. As we have noted, we are not sure of their faith. We know some of the story of the widow in Elijah's case, but nothing about the widow in Nain. We know they both knew pain and loss – they are both widows. They knew that life is messy and chaotic – even with faith and miracles.

As we come to this Table today and again take bread and break it and the cup and drink it, it should remind us that life is chaotic and messy. We are here because of unanswered prayer. The cup could not pass from Jesus – it required a son to submit to the authority of a father. We are here because we know that life is messy—there are no complete answers—just a faith that says that even in the darkest valleys our God is there. And, because Jesus lives, we too shall live – even in the midst of the chaos of a broken world – there is life and hope.

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989