

a visit from God

Luke 7:11-17; Trinity 16; September 18-19, 2021

There is a story from many years ago about a church somewhere in the farming Midwest. During a Sunday morning Lutheran service when the pastor was preaching a thunderstorm blew in and it started to hail. It was hailing so hard against the roof of that country church that the noise completely drowned out the pastor's voice so he stopped preaching. When the hail finally stopped, the church full of farmers and their families sat there for a while in the silence fully aware of the devastation that they would find when they went out; a complete loss. Without a crop to harvest, it was likely that some of them would lose their farms.

Then, in the silence one of those farmers began singing:

*What God ordains is always good; His will abideth holy.*

Others joined in.

*As He directs my life for me, I follow meek and lowly.*

Until the entire congregation was singing.

*My God indeed In ev'ry need Doth well know how to shield me;  
To Him, then, I will yield me. (TLH 521.1; from Rev. Ch. Mueller, Sr.)*

How could they sing, "What God ordains is always good" when God had just ordained the total loss of their crops? We just got done singing, "What God ordains is always good," and most, if not all, of us have suffered even worse things than a crop loss. We don't actually believe that God is always good, do we? Too often it sure doesn't seem that way.

In both our Old Testament and Gospel Readings we heard about young widows who lost their young sons to death. Last week we heard about how the widow of Zarephath trusted that God would keep her jar of flour full and jug of oil from running out. If she first baked a small loaf of bread for Elijah, she and her son would not starve to death, which was what happened. Today we heard how that same widow's son got sick and died, and she 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!**"

That widow was accusing God of saving them only to punish her for her sins by killing her son. When members of our congregation are suffering, they sometimes ask me if God is punishing them for something they have done. Sometimes they mention a specific sin of their past, but often their question is of a loved one's suffering. They can accept that they should suffer, but not the one they love. How could God ordain this to happen if He's truly "always good"? The widow of Nain in our Gospel, who was on the way to the cemetery to bury her only son, could very well have been thinking the same thing.

When we are going through suffering the question that we often ask is, "Where is God when we need Him?" "If God really loves and cares for me and my loved ones, why doesn't He come and do something about it?" "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me when I desperately need you?" And when the pastor points to Elijah raising from death the son of the widow of Zarephath and Jesus raising the widow of Nain's son, there seems to be little comfort in that. "Sure, they got their sons back alive, but my suffering or my loss hasn't gone away."

I would love to be able pray to God like Elijah did, "**O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again,**" or whatever else it is that is needed, and God would grant my request like He did Elijah. Nor has God given me the power of His Son, Jesus, to say, "**Young man, I say to you, arise,**" and the dead are raised, the sick are healed, those in any pain or suffering restored, or whatever else was lost is returned. I pray to God for miracles, but just because I'm a pastor does not mean that God listens to my prayers more than He listens to your prayers. I don't have a direct line to God that other Christians don't also have. God hears your prayers just as much as mine.

When it seems like God doesn't hear or answer our prayers, a simple yet deep faith trusts that, "What God ordains is always good." This faith will not try to plumb the depths of God's mind, as if we could ever approach God in the majesty of His mighty power. This faith will not attempt to reason or bargain with God as if we have something to offer Him that God doesn't already have. This faith will trust that God still loves us and cares for us despite our sinfulness. And this faith will humbly beg for what we need for Jesus' sake.

So when we are struggling to see beyond our suffering or the suffering of those we love, the likely problem is that we are looking inside ourselves and all we can see is our misery. We only see our need and our suffering and nothing else. If we listen to ourselves, we hear whining and complaining about how life isn't fair, that God isn't treating us fairly. Our focus is inwardly sinful when we need to be looking outwardly to God in faith.

What will this outward looking faith focus on? Jesus, especially in His suffering on the cross because of our sin. Jesus on the cross for us is our only hope and consolation. Faith in God will lead us to the cross of Jesus when we are suffering. Our problem might be that we are trying to work out our suffering on our own and turning to Jesus only after we have exhausted all other avenues. Jesus should be our first resort, not our last. What do we know about Jesus that supports truth?

Our Gospel Reading presents a hopeless situation, at least humanly speaking. The only son of a widow had died and they were carrying him out to the cemetery to be buried. In those days, a widow with no grown son to care for her was reduced to begging to survive. We are told a large crowd was in the procession. (If you want a big funeral, die young and die tragically.)

**And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep."** When in the midst of suffering and we are tempted to think that God cares nothing for us, this Word reminds us of the truth. God in Christ Jesus has **compassion** for us in our suffering and losses. When Jesus said to the widow, **"Do not weep,"** it was not a heartless, "Get over it; it's no big deal," sort of thing. The form of the verb used in Greek indicates that she did not need to keep on weeping; her weeping and sadness were appropriate up to that point, but she could now stop crying. How could Jesus say that?

**Then [Jesus] came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.** The reason that poor widow could stop crying was that Jesus was not waiting to do something. He stopped the procession to the cemetery as something unnecessary and raised the young man from death to life.

This miracle brings hope and comfort in the midst of our suffering, not because we should expect the same thing to happen for us right now, but it reminds us that the same outcome is guaranteed for us in the end because Jesus has died and risen from the dead to save us and raise us from the dead. The only way that widow's only son could rise that day was because Jesus took his death into His own body, the flesh and blood of the only Son of God, and suffered with it on the cross, died, and rose on the third day. Jesus raising the only son of that widow certainly brought her comfort and security in this life, but God's only Son dying and rising brings us comfort and security for eternal life.

God has not promised us easy lives in this world if only we follow Him in faith. Nowhere in His Word does God say He will spare us from all pain and suffering if we do our best to be good Christians. Actually, God tells us the opposite. If we remain faithful to Him, it will bring suffering in our lives. What God does promise to those who have faith in Him is that He will bring us through pain and suffering with Jesus in this life to life everlasting with Jesus.

So when we are suffering and praying for relief and it doesn't seem to be coming, and we are questioning why God won't come and help like He did raising the son of the widow of Zarephath through Elijah and Jesus Himself raising the only son of the widow of Nain, we need to remember that we have had a visit from God already. What we are waiting for to happen has already happened.

Where is God when we need Him in our suffering? He is with us always in His only Son Jesus. We suffer with Him because He has suffered with us and for us already. **God has visited His people** in Christ. He comforts us through this Word. He forgives and strengthens us as He visits us in His body and blood in the Sacrament.

When people ask me where God is when they or a loved one is suffering and dying, the only answer I have for them is Jesus, who suffered, died, and rose from the dead for all of us. That's a "meek and lowly" faith in God's only Son who became meek and lowly to save us. "What God ordains is always good... I follow meek and lowly." Amen.