

THE DISCIPLINE OF DEATH

Texts on Sunday, July 21, 2013

2 Kings 4: 18-37; Luke 7: 12-16

Many stories in the Bible are told at the River Jordan. We heard one early this month, as the disciple Elisha proceeded with Elijah across the Jordan, and there asked of his soon-departing master a double portion of his spirit. Next Sunday, we will hear another Elisha story from Jordan's bank. We call these master/disciple stories; from them, we want to learn the disciple's mind, how we heal, and how we learn to help others heal. Now here's a curious thing: After Elisha, a long time passes and scriptures tell no tale from the verge of Jordan. 900 years pass with no word from these waters. Then comes the master John the Baptist down to the river to pray.

Then it came to pass that a disciple, Jesus, came from Nazareth, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (Mark 1.9) Did Jesus ask of his master a double portion of his spirit? We don't have that story. But when Jesus says to the dead boy, *Rise!* and he sits up, and when the people remember how, long ago, Elisha lay mouth on mouth, eye on eye on a dead boy, to bring him to life, remembering that no power like that has played in this land since; and when they say, "A great prophet has risen among us!"; then we know that after centuries of oppression, a double portion of Spirit is once more loose in the land. A spirit for life over death. We need that spirit now. Let us pray.



Did these miracles of resurrection happen? Did the really dead come to life at the touch of Elisha, at the word of Jesus? I don't know the answer to that question. But I know this. If my faith hung on whether these stories are facts, it would not be faith. If these stories just had to be scientifically so, else I lose my trust in God, then my religion would be something thin and brittle and inflexible and ideological and small. No. We have these stories because, in their extremity of need, people said, *Tell us that one again. We need to hear that one again, for no power like that has played in this land for a long time.* The word of God from the man of God became the Bible of revelation not mainly because it happened but mainly because you need to hear it for healing, and because you need to speak it.

Today, in the wake of Trayvon Martin—or at the wake of Trayvon Martin, for in a larger sense, he is not buried—and in the wake of hundreds of years of murder and oppression of people of color in this land; and having just sat through one more act of America's barren tragedy of racism and greed; hear this word. *Young man, I say to you, rise!* This Bible story is here because you need to hear it, and you need to speak it against all the powers of death arrayed all 'round. Speak this word with me. *Young man, I say to you, rise!*

Learn the discipline of death from the Shunamite woman. The Shunamite and her husband had means and they had been kind and generous to Elisha. They set aside a room in their house that he might have a place to stay whenever he traveled through. One day, Elisha asked what he might do for her in return, but she would take nothing. Though her husband was very old, Elisha promised her that she would bear a son. This is the oldest, most-told story in the Bible, that a woman, believing there should come no child from her to her people, might conceive and bear a son and call his name. Why is this the oldest, most-told story? Because everyone is barren some way, some time. Everyone who has ever hoped true has had hope dashed. Everyone has despaired. Everyone needs to show and tell the story of unexpected life. But it only comes true in the discipline of death.

“Do not lie to me,” the Shunamite woman told Elisha when he spoke of her coming joy. Then the woman conceived and bore a son in due time, as Elisha had declared. And now: the boy is dead. You might ask, *Is this the right story to be telling with Trayvon Martin so dead?—and Kimani Gray so dead, Ramarley Graham so dead, Oscar Grant, Kendrec McDade, Troy Davis, Sean Bell, all so dead with thousands more?* The dead can get no justice. Is the story of the Shunamite woman’s dead boy a good tale for today? Listen in the discipline of death, for this mother is on the move.

Her husband cannot understand why she wants to go see the man of God. *It’s not a sacred day, it’s not the Sabbath*, he calls out. He stands for that kind of religion which thinks God works magic; which assumes that on the right days, with the right words and the right system and the right attorneys and advocates, justice will be done. *You’ve got to use the system*, the husband seems to say. And she replies, *Shalom!* That’s all she says: *Shalom*.

When she drives up to Elisha’s house, he sends worried words out to her by his servant. *Shalom with you? Shalom with your man? Shalom with the child?* And she answers, *Shalom*. That’s all she says.

What shalom is this? Where does this come from? Let’s not say, *Total faith in God*, as if that answers the question. Faith in God names a mystery; does not explain it. Where is the land of perfect acceptance and perfect resistance to the barren injustice of death? Can you get there? How? Can you drink from its waters?

For 27 years, Nelson Mandela found himself day by day in prison, in a barren land. Yet did he not also dwell there in the land of perfect acceptance and perfect resistance to the barren injustice of death? A PBS documentary summarized his mastery of the discipline of death this way: “Through his intelligence, charm, and dignified defiance, Mandela bent even the most brutal prison officials to his will, assumed leadership of his jailed comrades, and became the master of his own prison.” Listen, we are telling

master/disciple stories and every one holds this key: No one masters without a discipline. Death is that prison within whose walls all live and all try to shape meaning for life, and many fall into deep despair. With every breath, Mandela learned the Shalom of freedom from the discipline of death.

If you are thinking, *But I'm no Mandela*, then learn from the Shunamite woman in the barren wound of her son's death. Elisha responds to her grief with a plan to send his staff down to be laid on the dead boy. See what the tale is telling. Despite his double portion of spirit, the man of God has not the least inkling of the boy's death. Something is not flowing in him, spiritually, and though he senses his weakness, he cannot fix it. He has let his religion become formal and bureaucratic. He thinks he knows the system, how appeals work, what affidavits to file, how to get his magic stick to do the trick. Just like the husband back at home, he has abandoned Spirit.

But now the mother wakes him. "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave here without you." See what the tale is telling. The mother moves the miracle. It is her Shalom, her peace, her persistence, her insistence that there exist no systems that work righteousness by themselves or bring life on their own—*she* makes the miracle move. She has studied the discipline of death and now she is master of the moment of God. Without her—shalom, shalom—the boy stays dead and the future will not open.

Like Mandela fronting the vast landscape of barren time for most of thirty years, knowing nothing how it would end, or if death would bring the end, the Shunamite woman is living in two lands at once: perfect acceptance and perfect resistance. She does not know her boy will live! Surely she is in bitter distress, as Elisha says. Sybrina Fulton is in bitter distress, as Elisha says, and Tracy Martin, and the mothers and fathers of all the children slain. Of course you are in bitter distress at the miscarriage of justice in Florida since that raining February night until this blistering one!

But like the Shunamite woman in the discipline of death, get you into two lands at once! In the one, there is death. In this land, there is no true justice, no true peace. In this one, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates:

"I have seen nothing within the actual case presented by the prosecution that would allow for a stable and unvacillating belief that George Zimmerman was guilty. That conclusion should not offer you security or comfort . . . in the wisdom of our laws. On the contrary, it should greatly trouble you. But if you are simply focusing on what happened in the court-room, then you have been head-faked by history and bought into an idea of fairness which cannot possibly exist.

The injustice inherent in the killing of Trayvon Martin was not authored by a jury given a weak case . . . The injustice was authored by a country which, for the lion's share of its history, has taken as its policy to erect a pariah class. The killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman is not an error in programming. It is the correct result of forces set in motion years ago [which we] have done very little to arrest . . .

It is painful to say this: Trayvon Martin is not a miscarriage of American justice, but American justice itself. This is not our system malfunctioning—it is our system working as intended. To expect our juries, our schools, our police to single-handedly correct for this, is to look at the final play in the final minute of the final quarter and wonder why we couldn't come back [and win] from twenty-four down.”

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/07/trayvon-martin-and-the-irony-of-american-justice/277782/>

That is the one land. It is not Beulah land. Can you live in it with eyes open, as Mandela did from prison, as the Shunamite woman did on the back of a donkey toiling the road to Mt. Carmel? Learn the discipline of death. You do live in this land, and you can live in this land, because you also live in another, now, in a “house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

In this other land we dwell, that indwells us, the evils of America are not pardonable, and are not less, but neither are they too much to bear, as they were not too much for those of your ancestors, who were driven in chains across the barren landscapes of America’s tragic history. In this other land where you dwell, you live not fearing any man, or any systems of men, “for you are already dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Col. 3.3) Here you are alive now and eternally, and from here you act. From Shalom you go. From Shalom you lead your fellow prisoners toward freedom! From Shalom you go to the man of God to demand the dead be raised.

Do you know Shalom land? It is found inside the discipline of death, inside your prayerful preparation to die to the very dearest desires for happiness you hoped to suck from the breast of a pleasant life. Yes, to learn to die. It was the job of the church to teach you this discipline of death so you might bear the burden of your prison and become its master, and come out, shouting *Come out!* to the dead; pressing mouth to the breathless mouth of the dead, eye to blind eye, hand to the stilled hand, till the force of divine spirit within you give life and a new world to the dead, and they rise.

Listen, mothers of the dead, fathers of the dead: Will you saddle up your donkey and march to Washington this August 24 to raise our children from the dead? All who will go, stand. Say, *I will march to raise the boy from the dead!* Can you help? Say, *I will send to raise the boy from the dead.*

O children of God, know that no power like this has played in the land for a long time. We are disciples of the death of Christ, and though our heart lives quiet and deep in Shalom land, our body does not rest from pure resistance in this troubled land. May a double portion of Spirit once more be loosed upon the land through your servants, O God of grace and power.

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The Riverside Church
in the City of New York