

AWAKE TO THE DREAM

Texts on Sunday, June 10, 2007

1 Kings 17: 8-24; Luke 7: 11-17

The story of Elijah in Zarephath begins this way: “When he came to the gate of the town, a widow . . .” The story of Jesus in Nain begins this way: “As he came to the gate of the town, a man, the only son of a widow . . .” After the dead son is brought to life, of Elijah the old story concludes, “And he gave the boy to his mother.” The gospel story echoes: “The one who was dead began to speak—and Jesus gave him to his mother.” This echo is not coincidental; indeed, it is not just an echo but more like a new release of an old movie. Some of you know the term I like to use: *the twice-told tale*. The Bible is filled with scores upon scores of tales retold. They have been carefully crafted from the old, with more love and honor than someone singing, say, Satchmo’s “Beautiful World” wants to celebrate him as she interprets the tradition in her fresh way. When an ancient Bible story was retold by the lovers of Jesus, the ones who knew the old could feel the texture of the new song as well as the old, and feel deeply moved by both. But unlike the cover of a pop song, this redoubling of the familiar scripture carried a profound message with it. If we miss that message, we can go a long way down a road to nowhere with our religion.

In these early chapters of Luke’s gospel, the author is working through the question, Who is this man Jesus? Now an answer begins to take shape: *He is like Elijah*. Who was Elijah? If someone could prove that Elijah was only a legend, I think it would not matter for those whose inward hearing has been wired to wonder at the world by Elijah stories. For Elijah breaks into Israel like water from a rock. Chapter after chapter of 1 Kings, one reads brief accounts of the early kings, how they fought for power and lands and sometimes for God, and how they married and died. Then, into this landscape of struggle comes Elijah. Not since the stories of Moses, set hundreds of years earlier, has there been such possibility flowing in the desert of human desires.

Here is one who brings his whole attention to God—not in boring, boxed-up, repressed, formal religious garments, but in a way that causes the political world and the natural to shift and shape around the Word in him. Miracles of life-giving break out through him. The Elijah stories proclaim that though it seems we are surrounded by death, there is more to see in the endless landscape. The dry dust of our existence—the utility bills, the fight with the spouse, the part of the job you hate—all this famine and drought, is drenched with powers of life. Elijah brings the word: Wake up! God is!

When the experience of Jesus broke forth among a small band of Jews eight or nine hundred years after these Elijah stories had shaken the dry land, this was the ancient wisdom they wanted to shout from the housetops: *Do you remember how our hearts burned within us when we told of Elijah springing life from death? That is how alive we are now who have been touched by Jesus. Listen. Let me sing you one of our old songs with some new words we’ve written.* That is how a twice-told tale begins.

But how long can you stay awake? When a new song lifts your heart with hope, and you go out and buy the CD and play one track again and then again because the strains of that

voice, that melody, somehow break open the cover of clouds and somehow it feels possible to love, to see, even to do the dishes, as that music pours down—how long does it last? A month? A year? In a recent edition of *The News from Lake Wobegon*, Garrison Keillor painted a scene from his 1950s childhood, where a song would come on the radio as he and his parents sat in the parlor, a song from the war years, before he was born. He recalled how his mother and father would turn one to the other with glances the child could not interpret; eyes for each other from a depth he could not touch. A song can help reveal some almost forgotten truth throughout a lifetime. We know that; we've been there. But that was not the question. The question was, How long can you stay awake?

The long-married, even well-married, who awaken to their life-giving, erotic vision at the sound of an old song are re-awakening as the song plays; it is as if they had fallen asleep to their once-perfect acceptance of the totality of this beloved. Now they wake, now they touch that—the true other—again. Every complaint, every sorrow, every satisfaction they have enjoyed somehow now adds to the truth of their original vision of love when they offered their life to the other. The excitement of this experience lies in the re-awakening—in the awareness that we have not had the strength to stay awake for more than an hour. How long *can* we stay awake? Not very. A serious life—which is to say, a religious life, for however one is serious, that is how one is religious—is always serious for the question, How can I, who am found often sleeping, awake?

The miracle stories of Elijah and of Jesus can guide you in and from your sleep. Because you live in these times, you must first respond to the question these times ask. It is, Did those boys really come back from the dead? You may choose to think so, but understand that it is your choice. It is not a requirement of serious religion, and your faith does not depend on your believing in miracles literally. Indeed, faith may actually be harmed by belief so literal. For if your God can reverse the laws of nature at will, but does so—or worse, only *used* to do so—just here and there, for this one and that one, and not for *this* one and *not* for that one, then, by your own account, God must also be responsible for causing every calamity hateful to humans. Who can be surprised when people leap to atheism to get away from such a monster of capriciousness?

The god of occasional miracles is a dangerous game to play, for such a god is hardly better than your manservant, a god you praise like a footman when you like his performance, a god you hate or even dismiss like a footman when you don't like what life delivers. Like the widow's faithless railing, "What have you against me, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son." How selfish we are, how childish our thinking, to suppose ourselves so important that the power of the universe should focus its energy on our story of evil-doing or well-doing to punish or reward. Telling stories of death undone as if they were literally true may turn them into bedtime stories; which is to say, stories that will put you to sleep spiritually. For they suggest that God is sometimes active, but usually not. Worse, they suggest that God is good and even best when God removes your trouble, sweetens your pie, even extends your time beyond death, so that you can go on and on. Just what you always dreamed for—when you were sleeping.

The wisdom of your religious tradition goes far deeper than to put you to sleep with a dream

so small as mere more-of-you as you are now, or mere unlacing of the bonds that bind you. The stories of Elijah and Jesus, bringing the dead to life, will do you deep good if you hear them as songs sung by people who were coming to life. The general society who first heard these stories were in great tension, famished, thirsty, dead in the daily performance of their ordinary religious duties. The seriousness was gone, just as it is today. Still, some were waiting, willing to receive, wanting to awake. You may lay it to your heart that the ancients only told and retold those stories that helped them spiritually. Now they are handed to you, who are found often sleeping, that you might awake right now, and give your full attention, no more delay, to that in your life which must come alive again, your true child, your gift to the world, filled with power to love and to create, made great by the grace of God. What is that relation within you that is dead asleep? That you avoid? That you, in your hunger, are preparing even now to lie down and die with, and sleep forever. Move toward that grave, quiet, still untouched relation, that dead child. Do not delay. This is the gospel: Wake up!

See this. When famine and drought is over the land, and Elijah is sent to Zarephath by the word of God to a widow, he is in a condition quite strange to our conventional idea of religiousness. Elijah, God's word, does not go to give the wretched, hungry widow what she thinks she needs. Her mind is set on herself. Elijah must overcome whatever impulse he has to leave her be, or to find her what she thinks she needs, in order to ask her to give more, more than she can give. She wants to go to sleep, forever. So do we all, as we face the unchanging conditions of our famine, our partial living, our limited loving, our despair of death that flies up like crows from carrion as we wish for an easier way out. Let me go and prepare a last supper and die, we say. We say it with our addictions, our distractions, our fantastic consolations of life set in another pasture, another life, a realm we have never known.

But the word of God says, Fear not! Give *me* to drink. Give *me* to eat. Wake up. Now. Give attention to reality, which is God, first. Do not give your energy, what little there is, to your sorrows and your fears. Do not turn on the T.V. Aim straight toward the death you fear, and do not try to go around it. Do not suppress your feelings, but move through them as through an element of water that surrounds you and allows you to go forward. If Elijah had not asked of the widow more than she could give, she would never have discovered reality: a jar of meal that cannot be spent and a flask of oil that will never fail. The infinite and eternal life—it must be said a thousand, thousand times—is not for having later, after you sleep. It opens now, in the jar and the flask, in the bread and the cup. It is in the cross you come to and take willingly, awake, when you hear the word of God asking you for more than you have, more than you can give. Finally, setting the glass of liquor down, leaving off the radio and the tube, going not to the kitchen cupboard or the computer or the store or to work or to a meeting—finally you give to the word of God all you have, which is attention to who or what is right before you. You wake when you do this, and the answer to the question, what you are to do, clarifies. What was empty is full. What was dead is returned to your arms, living. This is the promise, if you will trust the Word, who says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

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