

Old Stories Made New

I cannot remember a time when I could not read. My parents used to tell me that I began to acquire that skill and habit when I was still 2. Throughout my life, stories and words have been important to me and I am still, when I get the chance, a voracious reader. I'm choosier than I used to be – I now mostly read theology, church history, and other church-related books to improve my mind and mysteries or fantasy for fun, occasionally dipping into science fiction, biographies, and other non-fiction as the mood strikes. This past September, as I've done for several years, I included in a report to the deacons my church-related reading list for the past 12 months which totaled 35 books. The list will be shorter this year in part because it took me over four months to work my way through Bishop N.T. Wright's two-volume Paul and the Faithfulness of God. Officially, that's over 1700 pages but since there are extensive appendices and indices, we'll call it about 1400 pages of actual text.

I mention this for a couple of reasons related to today's topic. First of all, although I try not to simply regurgitate the things I read in my sermons, what I learn from what I read does influence my thinking and what I preach. This morning, several of the ideas that I'll talk about do indeed come from N.T. Wright and his massive work on Paul. Second, just as stories have been important to me in my life, so they have been for all "People of the Book": Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. So what I want to look at is the importance of one particular story, that of the Widow of Nain and her son, how it is linked to the story we heard last week about the Centurion, how it shows the influence of Paul's thought on his sometime companion Luke, and finally what we should take from it. At first glance, this brief paragraph doesn't seem to offer much but as I discovered this week, there is a world of meaning in these seven verses.

Tradition ascribes the writing of the Third Gospel to a man named Luke, a physician who was an occasional companion of Paul on his missionary journeys. Luke and Acts are seen as two companion books written by this man due to their dedication to a certain Theophilus and to similarities of language and structure between them. In Acts, there are several passages which identify the writer as one of Paul's traveling party, the so-called "We" passages. We heard one of them a few weeks ago on Mother's Day from Acts 16: "One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination..." If tradition is correct and Dr. Luke, the friend of Paul, was the author of both The Gospel According to Luke and The Acts of the Apostles, we can assume that his viewpoint on the story of Jesus was heavily influenced by Paul. In fact, if indeed the writer of the shortest and earliest Gospel was the same John Mark who briefly travelled with Paul and both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were based on that book, as scholars believe, then it's much easier to list the books of the New Testament that were NOT influenced or written by Paul than those which were. The shorter category includes: The Gospel According to John, The Letter to the Hebrews, the General Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude, and the Revelation to John.

If Luke was influenced by Paul, what difference does that make in his writing of the Gospel that bears his name? This is where I am beholden to Bishop "Tom" Wright, whose overarching theme in the massive Paul and the Faithfulness of God is that the Apostle to the Gentiles was concerned with showing those potential converts to the Way of Jesus that the life and work of Jesus was indeed the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and not a whole new philosophy or religion. Wright holds that the primary influence on Paul's thought, both before and after his dramatic experience of the Living Christ on the road to Damascus, was the Second Temple

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Judaism he'd studied at the knee of Gamaliel. While it is clear that Paul, a Roman citizen, was familiar enough with the tenets of Græco-Roman religion and philosophy to utilize them in his work, he was, as he wrote to the Philippians, "a Hebrew of the Hebrews." It is Paul's insistence on the faithfulness of God in keeping God's promises to humankind through Jesus that Wright feels underlies all of his theology in the new Way. This was, as Paul tells us in our second reading this morning, a theology he worked out without much human assistance, no doubt with fear and trembling. After years of solitude in Arabia and Damascus, Paul did consult briefly with Peter and James but he was convinced enough of his own understanding of the work of God in Christ that he had no trouble, as he writes to the Galatians in verses just beyond our reading, in opposing Peter "to his face."

Paul must have preached on the fulfillment of the promises of the God of Abraham quite a bit. To his potential Gentile converts, this would have been an important link to ancient wisdom, as new ideas were always suspect. And we must remember that although Paul was and is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles, he always began his work in a new city by teaching in the synagogue, always hopeful that his own people would recognize in Jesus the hoped-for Messiah. So when Luke began to compile into a coherent whole the stories he'd heard about Jesus from a number of sources, he was influenced by Paul's thought. I believe we can see traces of this both in the stories he chose and in the way in which he presents them. The paired stories of the Widow of Nain and that of the Centurion give us an excellent example.

A repeated theme in the Gospels is that faithful Jews anticipated the return of a former prophet, probably Elijah, to herald the coming of the Messiah. When Jesus unexpectedly restores the life of the widow's son, the initial reaction of the onlookers is, "A great prophet has risen among us!" They say this with great fear (or reverence) and glorifying God. If you had been reading Luke consecutively, you might have connected this with a story that Luke told in chapter four. In that story, Jesus is preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he grew up. In a sermon that so enrages his neighbors that they attempt to stone him, he points out that God does not always choose the Chosen People to bless. He uses as an example Elijah's blessing of a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. In citing this story, Jesus mentions that Elijah fed that widow and her son during a famine but equally as well-known to his audience would have been the fact that Elijah also restored that young man to life. Jesus has preached that story and now he has duplicated or even bettered it. When Elijah restored the widow's son, the young man had just stopped breathing. Elijah performs what sounds suspiciously like CPR on the boy, accompanied by fervent prayers to God. When Jesus restores the widow's son, the young man has been dead long enough to be prepared for burial. The only words Jesus speaks are to the dead man's mother, "Do not weep," and to the young man himself, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The only physical action he takes is to come forward and touch the bier. A great prophet indeed!

If you remember that sermon from Jesus in Nazareth, you may also remember that the other offensive story he told was of the time when the prophet Elisha healed the Syrian general, Naaman, of leprosy. Elisha showed God's compassion for a bitter enemy of Israel. So, as we heard last week, did Jesus show God's compassion for a bitter enemy of Israel in healing the servant of the centurion. Again, Jesus outdid his prophetic predecessor. Elisha made Naaman bathe in the Jordan seven times. The centurion, showing faith above all those in Israel, asks

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Jesus to “say the word only.” In the event, Jesus doesn’t even do that. He merely sends the messengers back to the centurion’s house where they find the miracle accomplished.

What did it mean for those who witnessed these two events or to Luke who wrote about them that Jesus should outstrip Elijah and Elisha in power? Elijah, after all, was the prophet who was to return to herald the coming of the Messiah in popular understanding. The second response of the crowd to the raising of the widow’s boy was, “God has looked favorably on his people!” Many of the Jews who lived in the time of Jesus and Paul believed that, although many of the exiles had returned from Babylon and the Temple had been rebuilt, that the time of exile and God’s displeasure had not yet ended. There was no son of David on the throne. They continued to be under occupation, first by the Persians, then by the Syrian Greeks, finally by Rome. The Holy of Holies in the Temple was not, as it had been in the good old days, inhabited by the Ark of the Covenant, containing the tablets of Moses, and the glory of the Lord. God was not present to God’s people as God had been. The promises of God for peace and wholeness had not yet been fulfilled. God had not yet looked favorably upon his people. But the famous prophecy of Malachi told them what would finally happen: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” Luke has quoted part of this verse already, words also spoken by Isaiah and, in Luke’s Gospel, by John the Baptizer: “Prepare the way...” The implication is clear. If Jesus was clearly greater than the prophet for whom they were waiting and if John saw Jesus as the one for whom he prepared the way then Jesus was the one who signified God’s favor for the people. Jesus was the one who had come suddenly. Jesus was the revelation of God.

Luke tells many other stories to seal this conclusion but one stands out. In a passage sadly not in the lectionary, immediately after the raising of the widow’s son we read that disciples of the Baptizer have gone to him to tell him of Jesus’ deeds. John sends them back to Jesus to ask if he is indeed the one who is to come. Jesus reminds them of what he has done and how it fulfills the prophecies. Then he quotes that same prophecy of Malachi to the crowds and identifies John as the messenger who will prepare the way. Although he does not say it, he is clearly claiming for himself the role of the one for whom the way is prepared, the Lord.

The way had been prepared; the Lord had suddenly come to the Temple. But still, the Temple was bereft of the tablets of the Law of Moses. And Jesus, clearly, did not stay in the Temple but continued to travel and heal and was betrayed and killed and rose and ascended. But what if the words of God were inscribed not on stone tablets in the heart of the Temple but upon the hearts of those who love God? That’s what Jeremiah had reported as a promise of God. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” I won’t reconstruct his argument here but Wright makes a good case, as have many before him, that this is Paul’s answer to the place of the Law in the lives of those following the Way of Jesus – not as a list of do’s and don’ts but as an innate understanding of the will of God that comes from having the Spirit in our lives. He carries the analogy further – with the Law in our hearts, we are the Temple. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ...Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” If you’d

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begun to fear that this sermon was never going to contain any practical advice, here is some. We are to treat our bodies as we would the place where God dwells. That means caring for our physical selves and not damaging our bodies through lack of attention or deliberate misuse. Our faithfulness to God in response to God's faithfulness to us includes our bodies as well as our hearts and minds – how we live, how we eat, how we rest, how we interact with the bodies of others. We are called, as we sang earlier, to be God's sanctuaries in this place.

With the Temple in Jerusalem long gone and with our worship of God in Christ turned to praise and singing, we can see that Paul also prepared for this in his new understanding of our duties to God. No longer do the faithful offer sacrifices of animals and produce. Instead, as Paul wrote to the Romans, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Again, we are being called to use our bodies to pursue the agenda of God rather than our own selfish desires. Most of us will never be called to lay down our lives on behalf of others but we can certainly give up behaviors that cause others to doubt the power of God in our lives. We can certainly give up time in our busy lives in order to help others and provide them with a true witness of what God has done for us. We may not be able to heal like Jesus but we can take a sick friend to the doctor. We may not even know CPR, like Elijah, but we can bring life to someone who is shut up in a room due to illness or incapacity or fear.

Jesus, of course, did make that ultimate sacrifice as a part of making real for us the life to which God is calling us all. In him, God fulfilled his promise to Abraham that Abraham's descendants should be a blessing to the people of all the world. Now, as the Body of Christ, it is our turn to continue the work of Jesus in blessing the world. We do not make the sacrifice of Jesus again but he himself gave us a special way to remember it, to consider what it meant and means in our lives. In remembrance of him, we heal the sick, we feed the poor, we open the door to our sisters and our brothers and invite them into relationship with us. In remembrance of him we search for truth; in remembrance of him we always love; in remembrance of Jesus, we look into our hearts and discover the faithful love and presence of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.