

5th Sunday in Lent
2 Kings 4:17-37
Sermon #1229
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¹⁷ But the woman conceived, and she gave birth to a son at that same time of year, just as Elisha said to her. ¹⁸ The boy grew up, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. ¹⁹ Then he said to his father, "My head! My head!" His father said to his servant, "Carry him to his mother." ²⁰ So he picked him up and carried him to his mother, and the boy sat on her lap until noon. Then he died. ²¹ Then she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God. She shut the door behind her and went out. ²² Then she called to her husband and said, "Send one of the servants to me with one of the donkeys, so that I can run to the man of God and come back." ²³ He said, "Why are you going to him today? It's not the new moon, and it's not the Sabbath." But she said, "It's all right." ²⁴ Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead the way. Don't slow down for me unless I tell you." ²⁵ So she went to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When the man of God saw her from a distance, he said to his servant Gehazi, "Look! That's the woman from Shunem!" ²⁶ Now run to meet her and say, 'Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your son all right?'" She answered, "We're all right." ²⁷ Then she came to the man of God at the mountain, and she grasped his feet. Gehazi stepped forward to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone, for her soul is in distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me. He has not told me." ²⁸ Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn't I say, 'Don't give me false hope?'" ²⁹ Then Elisha said to Gehazi, "Hike up your garments for travel, and take my staff in your hand and go! If you meet someone, do not greet him, and if someone greets you, do not answer. Put my staff on the boy's face." ³⁰ But the boy's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and your soul lives, I will not leave you." So he got up and followed her. ³¹ Gehazi went ahead of them and put the staff on the boy's face. But there was no sound, and there was no response. So he went back to Elisha and told him, "The boy did not wake up." ³² When Elisha came to the house, there the boy was—dead, lying on his bed. ³³ So he went in and he shut the door behind the two of them. Then he prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ He got up and lay down on top of the boy. He put his mouth to the boy's mouth, his eyes to the boy's eyes, his palms to the boy's palms. Then he bent down over him, and the boy's flesh became warm. ³⁵ He went back into the house and paced back and forth. Then he went up and bent down over him, and the boy sneezed seven times. Then the boy opened his eyes. ³⁶ Then Elisha called Gehazi and said, "Call the woman of Shunem!" So he called her, and she came in. He said, "Pick up your son." ³⁷ So she came in and fell at Elisha's feet and bowed down to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out.

Dear Friends and Fellow Redeemed in Christ,

Do you know where Shunem is? I didn't. I had to look it up. Here's what I found. It's a small town near the plain of Jezreel in the tribal territory of Issachar, approximately 10 miles due south of Nazareth. It was also situated on a major ancient trade route. Today it is called Sulam.

Any of that ring a bell for you or jog your memory? Me neither.

But that's where we're going today – an obscure Israeli village mentioned only a handful of times in the Bible. There we will meet up with an unnamed woman identified only by the town she lived in.

The town and the exact identity of the woman may be unfamiliar to us, but what she experienced is not. Which is undoubtedly one of the reasons God in his wisdom had this account recorded for us. With and through her, today we embark on

A FAMILIAR JOURNEY

And with God's help, we'll end up at the same place she did. Because hers and ours is a journey from fear to faith and from tragedy to triumph.

Our text is lengthy, so we're only going to consider select verses. It also contains some details that may arouse our curiosity as to why they are included, but which we really cannot comment on beyond the part they play in the whole narrative.

For our purposes this morning, we'll reduce the account of the Shunammite Woman to four general statements.

Statement #1. This woman experienced pain, loss, and a test of her faith. In the verses before our text we learn that the Shunammite woman was a devout believer who, along with her husband, extended hospitality and kindness to the prophet Elisha. In fact, as a convenience for him, she set up a furnished room where he stayed whenever he came that way.

The couple was childless and at a point in their life where they expected to remain that way. But Elisha revealed to her that God in his grace would allow her to conceive and give birth to a son. And that's what happened. We can only

imagine the depth of her joy at this unforeseen and unexpected blessing in her life.

Conversely, we can also only imagine the depth of her grief upon the loss of her child at what was presumably a very young age. Her son suddenly became ill and the boy's father sent him home from the field with a servant. ²⁰ **So he picked him up and carried him to his mother, and the boy sat on her lap until noon. Then he died.**

The death of any loved one is always a crushing, painful, experience. If that loved one is a child, the pain is magnified exponentially. From the way she would later interact with Elisha, it appears she struggled with why the Lord would allow such a thing to happen.

Statement #2. Nevertheless, in times of trouble, she knew where to turn. ²¹ **Then she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God. She shut the door behind her and went out.** ²² **Then she called to her husband and said, "Send one of the servants to me with one of the donkeys, so that I can run to the man of God and come back."**

Even before notifying her husband of their son's death she immediately made plans to see Elisha. She knew that he was a man of God, that he represented the one, true God, and that God alone could provide her with answers and comfort. So, she poured out her heart to the prophet.

Statement #3. Because she knew who Elisha was and what he was, she looked only to him for answers. This is one of those curious parts of the story. After learning the reason for her deep distress, Elisha sent his servant, Gehazi, and instructed him what to do when he saw her son.

The Shunammite woman, however, would accept no substitutes. It's almost as if she anticipated that Gehazi would be unsuccessful in his mission. She trusted only the Man of God. ³⁰ **But the boy's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and your soul lives, I will not leave you."**

Statement #4. God answered her prayer through Elisha and her son was returned to life. Our text concludes: ³⁶ **Then Elisha called Gehazi and said, "Call the woman of Shunem!"** **So he called her, and she came in. He said, "Pick up your son."** ³⁷ **So**

she came in and fell at Elisha's feet and bowed down to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out.

I believe that within this story we can find two great truths. The first has an *immediate* application to our lives as God's people *today*. The second is a *broader* application that has to do with our lives as God's people *forever*.

As to that first great truth and in keeping with the idea of life as a journey, we see the Shunammite woman traveling from fear to faith. Faced with uncertainty and loss and grief, she turned to her Lord, and the Lord responded to the needs of his child. In this case, it was a miracle of resurrection.

But God's answers are not always this striking. They come in different forms.

What I mean is this. Sometimes God chooses *not* to lift the hardships and pain he allows into the lives of his children. But that doesn't mean he's somehow removed himself from us. Or that he is AWOL. Or that he doesn't hear our prayers. Because he himself has promised that he'll never leave us or forsake us. And as Moses tells us in the Book of Numbers (23:19), **"God is not a man, that he should lie."**

So, in uncertain times we can count on the certainty of his presence and the reliability of his promises. It's vitally important that we know this and cling to this. Here's why:

Did you know that some version of the phrase "do not be afraid" or "do not fear" appears more than three hundred times in the Bible? Why do you think that it is?

I think we know. It's because by nature we are fearful creatures. We worry. We fret. We stress. So, our good and gracious and compassionate God is constantly reassuring us that he's got things under control. In every situation. Even difficult ones!

Such times are vivid reminders that while God has never promised us peace from all troubles, he has promised us peace in the midst of our troubles. And while he has not promised us the absence of any and all personal pain, he has promised us the strength to endure it.

And when we understand that, that **"God is our refuge and strength, a helper who can always be found in times of trouble,"** (Psalm 46:1) then we will

confidently echo these words of King David in Psalm 56: **“When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid”** (10-11, NIV).

That’s the journey the Shunammite woman and every child of God makes on a daily basis: the journey from fear to faith in God’s presence *with* his children and his promises *to* his children.

And if we’re looking for tangible proof of this, we need to look no farther than the cross of Jesus Christ. **“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things”** (Romans 8:32) – things like confidence and peace and strength for this journey we call life.

Which leads to the second great and broader truth embedded within this text: the ultimate journey from tragedy to triumph. The tragedy of the death of the Shunammite woman’s son gave way to the triumph of his resurrection.

Did you notice that all of our Scripture readings for today deal with resurrection? In a way, we’re getting ahead of ourselves, because we’re going to consider that topic on the grandest scale two weeks from today when we celebrate the great festival of Easter.

But before we get to that triumph, we must consider the tragedy that precedes it. Especially during the Lenten season our thoughts center on what Jesus went through – his suffering, pain, and death – and we think of why he went through it. The real tragedy is that he did nothing to deserve it. We did.

Our tragedy is that we are sinful human beings. Our tragedy is that in our weakness and frailty we fail to give God the honor he deserves. And because **“the wages of sin is death,”** the day will come when each one of us will be solemnly lowered into the ground or ceremoniously placed in a pull-out vault in a marble-faced wall.

And that wouldn’t be the end of it, and it certainly wouldn’t be the worst of it. The worst of it is where we *should* spend our eternity. Perdition is not a pleasant thought.

But that’s not what’s going to happen. Because the sins that should condemn us were placed on Jesus and condemned him. And as far as we’re concerned, their

power to damn us is gone. That's the great exchange. His pain, our gain. His death, our life.

How do we know this? How do we know that Jesus mission to save us from our sins and restore us into a right and eternal relationship with God was successful? Well, let's talk about that more in a couple of weeks. Spoiler alert. There's a resurrection involved.

And with it, we move from tragedy to triumph.

Let's end as we began. Let us acknowledge that uncertainty can and does have an emotional impact on our lives. It did for the Shunammite woman, and it does the same for us.

But most importantly, let us acknowledge that in this journey we call life we have a God who, with his presence and his promises, moves us from fear to faith. And we have a Savior who, with his life, death, and resurrection, moves us from the tragedy of sin to the triumph of heaven.

Therefore – and these are his words in Luke 12:32 – **“Do not be afraid, little flock.”** Amen.