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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/5/2016, the Third Sunday after Pentecost,
Lectionary 10
1 Kings 17:17-24, Luke 7:11-17

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him [Elijah], ⁹“Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.” (1 Kings 17:8-9, RSV)

“Ours is an invaded planet.”¹ This opening line here -- about ours being an invaded planet -- is a passing line in a commentary on Mark. I jotted down that line figuring that I might use it in a Christmas sermon someday. And maybe I will. But this morning’s combination of Bible lessons about Elijah and about Jesus, both in the land of Sidon, make me want to use the line now, to organize this sermon.

For that is what the LORD did in sending Elijah to the land of Sidon: the LORD was mounting a blessed invasion of that foreign land. Indeed, the LORD was mounting a counter-invasion in that land – a land along the Mediterranean coast.

The first invasion was caused by wicked king Ahab of Israel. He married a lady from Sidon. Her name was Jezebel, and she was a worshiper of Baal. I do not particularly blame Ahab for marrying Jezebel. The heart goes where it goes. If the king’s heart led him to marry Jezebel, then he should love her with all his heart and be true to her for as long as they both shall live. But that does not mean that he should abandon his LORD for hers.

Come to think of it, I do not blame Jezebel either for bringing her faith into the land of Israel. In fact, I rather admire her for her integrity. If she is a true believer in Baal, then it is a substantial form of love for her to try to convince her husband and her new people to worship Baal too, lest they be fundamentally wrong about life.

So, I do not blame Ahab for loving his wife, and do not blame Jezebel for trying to bring Ahab to her god. But I do blame Ahab for yielding to his wife on this point. He should have made it clear to his wife from the beginning that faith in the LORD is no game, and that he did not intend to surrender the God of Abraham, the God of the Exodus, and the God of his ancient people for his wife’s god. They could live together in mutual love and respect, but Ahab should not have become a worshiper of Baal.

¹ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark*. Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1983), page 41.

But he did. And since he was the king, he was in a position to advance the cause of Baal among his people. He did so. He built a house for Baal in Samaria (1 Kings 16:32). He established a sacred grove to Baal (1 Kings 16:33). The Bible says that Ahab was the worst of them all – of all the kings who had ruled Israel:

And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him. (1 Kings 16:30, KJV)

Later in First Kings, we can read the story of the great confrontation between the prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal. It is a story that should have led Ahab and Jezebel to reconsider this business of worshiping Baal. But this morning's story is earlier than that. This morning's story tells the early stages of the LORD's counter-offensive against Baal.

The LORD's first step was to bring drought to the land. It was as if the LORD was openly defying Baal, for that god claimed to be the god of fertility:

He was thought to be the personal force behind the rains, the dew, thunder, and lightning.²

The land cannot be fertile if there is no rain, so the LORD – the God of Israel - withheld the rain, as if defying Baal to do anything about it. Baal could not do anything about it, and so the land became drier and drier. Eventually the LORD – the God of Israel - restored the rains, but not before he took a second step in his counter-offensive against Baal. This morning's story is about that second step. It is the story of the LORD's invasion of the land of Sidon – a homeland for Baal. Jezebel had come from Sidon. Now the tables are turned. Now the LORD and his prophet Elijah go to Sidon, and there they do wonders of compassion. The LORD can prevent Baal from bringing the rains to Israel, but Baal cannot prevent the LORD from feeding the widow and her son and raising up the widow's son when he dies, right there in the land of Sidon. The LORD invades Sidon, as it were, with his goodness.

The particular form of goodness we read about this morning is about as good as it gets: The LORD raised the widow's son back to life. Pity that woman to have lost her son. It is the same in this morning's Gospel Lesson: there can hardly be more sorrow than for a widow to lose her only son. Not only does she lose a child close to her heart, but also she is left bereft of the help that son might have given her as she grows older. It was a different world – that ancient world, without our systems of social welfare. You hope the village folk would rally round her henceforth. Still, it is not the same as having your own child at hand.

²The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts: (Kindle Locations 3606-3607). Kindle Edition.

So, Elijah raises the boy back to life. He takes the dead boy from his mother's bosom and carries him upstairs and lays him on his a bed. Then he cries out most earnestly to the LORD for help. Then he stretches himself upon the boy three times and cries unto the Lord:

“O LORD my God, let this child's soul come into him again.”
(1 Kings 17:21, RSV)

And it was so. The LORD restored life to the son, and Elijah took the child downstairs and restored him to his mother. Then, I bet, she was happy again.

Now, let's turn to our Gospel Lesson. It is similar to the Elijah story, only greater. Much greater! Again, the story takes place in the land of Sidon, in a village called Nain. So, again we are dealing with a foreign people, not Jews. Jesus has invaded this land, to do some extraordinary good there.

Again, we are dealing with a widow who has lost her only son. Her situation is sad, certainly, and perhaps desperate. Like Elijah of old, Jesus raises the boy back to life and restores him to his mother. But note the differences between Elijah and Jesus – they are the differences between a *prophet* of the Lord and the Lord himself! Jesus does not cry out to God to save this child. Why should he cry out? He himself is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He has authority within himself to do this good deed. Jesus does not have to stretch himself three times upon the body of the dead son. He does not even wait to ask the mother's permission or to test her faith. He simply has compassion on her, and restores her son to life.

And this, my friends, is what reality is really like. At the heart of reality is compassion, because Jesus is at the heart of reality.

When I have to head off to the hospital, to visit the people of our congregation, I am glad to come to them in the conviction that Jesus is at the heart of this world, and he is good.

When I prepare a funeral sermon, as I am set to do for the memorial service for Bruce Edwards later this month, I am very glad to be able to say that at the heart of everything is Jesus, and he has power even over death!

When I encourage someone to fight the good fight of faith, even if we should fall, I very glad to know that Someone stands at the center of reality who is able to lift us up again.

When I encourage someone to repent and mend his way, mend her ways, I am very glad to be able to say that the One who calls each of us to repentance wants only our good and only that we should have abundant life.

And when I prepare a wedding sermon, as I am set to do for the wedding of Louisa and Thiago later his month, I am very glad to be able to encourage them on in life-long love, for that is the kind of love with which you and I are loved by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.