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**SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2010**  
**THE SECOND SUNDAY IN PENTECOST**  
**Luke 7 and 1 Kings 17 (The ultimate power over death)**

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**TODAY'S SERMON THEME:**

As much as we try to deny it, death is absolutely and overwhelmingly unavoidable. And we are ultimately powerless to stop it. But there is a force more powerful than death. A force that is available to us all. It is a force known as faith. Faith in God and faith in God's holy Son, Jesus. Through faith, death is no longer a final destination. It becomes a doorway into paradise.

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- 1. As most of you know, I made a hurried trip to Atlanta, Georgia, this past week to officiate and preach at the funeral service for my wife Dixie's youngest brother.** Jeffrey died quite unexpectedly a little over a week ago in Dublin, Ireland, after suffering what appears to have been a massive cerebral hemorrhage. He was only 50 years old; and he leaves behind his wife of 24 years and two beautiful daughters, ages 21 and 15. He was a top international executive for United Parcel Service, and he was accustomed to traveling and living for extended periods all over the world. For nearly all of his life, Jeff was full of zest and energy -- a vibrant and enthusiastic person. And as I said in my funeral homily, he was always filled with a child-like quality of joy. His great JOY for life reminded me of the closing prayer at our service of Holy Baptism, where we pray for "the gift of JOY and WONDER" in all of God's works. Jeff certainly had that gift of joy and wonder. Our gathering in Atlanta last week was the first time Dixie's entire family had assembled since their mother died eight years ago. Jeff was the youngest of the six children; and, sadly, he was the first to leave us.
- 2. On Friday afternoon, as I was spending nearly four hours at O'Hare airport in Chicago, I had a little time to reflect about the funeral I had just done . . . And about the countless hundreds of other funerals I have done over the last quarter century.** A few things came to my mind. A few things that at first seemed jumbled together, but which started to make sense through the day yesterday:
  - (1) I found myself thinking about the shock and pain that families feel when a loved one dies, followed by painful moments of deep despair and sorrow as the full extent of the loss becomes apparent.
  - (2) I thought about how helpful and encouraging it is to have supportive and loving people around us during those difficult moments.
  - (3) I thought about the laughter that often erupts at even the most painful moments, when someone shares a funny story or memory, or a favorite song is played.
  - (4) I thought about the power that the Christian faith has to address (and console) all of the sad thoughts, painful memories, and difficult moments.

I thought about all of this. And here is what finally came together for me during my layover time in Chicago, and my re-entry into life here in Fargo. This is the main point I want to emphasize as we look at two of our Scripture lessons for this morning.

As much as we try to deny it, death is absolutely and overwhelmingly unavoidable. And we are ultimately powerless to stop it. But there is a force more powerful than death. A force that is available to us all. It is a force known as faith. Faith in God and faith in God's holy Son, Jesus. Through faith, death is no longer a final destination. It becomes a doorway into paradise.

**3. In our first lesson today from Chapter 17 of First Kings, we have the great story of Elijah, the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC prophet, who has been ordered by God to leave Israel to go to Phoenicia.** Elijah winds up living with a widow and her son in the village of Zaraphath, just south of Sidon on the Mediterranean Sea. Elijah arrives during a tragic time of FAMINE in the Mideast, a time of dry earth and dry skies. God tells Elijah that this widow will care for him. But as Elijah arrives (in the section just before our lesson today), the widow is preparing one final meal for her son, before they both die of starvation. Elijah then prays to God, who miraculously multiplies the oil and flour, so that they were able to eat day after day after day. Without diminishing their supply. In our text for today, the widow's son becomes ill and dies. And then:

(1) The widow blames Elijah for the death of her son.

(2) Elijah takes the son's body, lays it on his own bed, stretches upon the child three times, and prays to God to restore the child's life.

(3) God raises the child to life. And Elijah gives him back to his mother.

**Into the most hopeless of all situations -- death -- God brings LIFE.  
Into the most desperate of all situations, God brings JOY.**

**4. In our Gospel lesson this morning from Luke Chapter 7, Jesus and His apostles walk into the tiny hilltop village of Nain just as a funeral procession is coming out. The only son of a widow has just died (as in our first lesson for today).** A great crowd of people is walking out the gates of the city, toward the small path that led to a cemetery down below. There is great sorrow and heartache in this story. Jesus walks to the funeral process and does three things: (1) With a heart overflowing with compassion, He tells the mother not to cry; (2) He reaches out His hands of love and touches the coffin; and, (3) He says, 'Young man, get up!' And the boy comes to life. Jesus restores him to his mother.

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Into the most desperate of all situations, God brings JOY.**

**5. In both of these stories -- and in countless other stories in the Bible -- the love and power of God summoned LIFE from the jaws of DEATH, demonstrating the overwhelming compassion that God has for His children.** A few observations about these two stories:

(1) In both miraculous stories, the widows without their only sons were bereft and left alone in their worlds -- without any legal standing in society.

(2) In both miraculous stories, the widows would have had only THREE options for survival (without their only sons): Living off another relative, becoming a beggar, or turning to prostitution.

(3) In the patriarchal societies in both of these stories -- the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC and the First Century AD -- this was the common lot of most women in the Mideast. (Unfortunately, in some countries today, the plight of women is not much better.) BUT . . . In both of our stories this morning, God takes note of the plight of the "least of His children" and takes action.

**6. But let us take our two Biblical stories one step further. In BOTH of our lessons -- the raising of the widow of Zaraphath's only son and the raising of the widow of Nain's only son -- BOTH stories conclude with praise and glory given to God.** Faith always leads to praise and thanksgiving, in all times, in all places, in all circumstances. The widow of Zaraphath tells Elijah that she KNOWS IN HER HEART that God has worked through Elijah to restore her son to life. And the word of the Lord began to spread rapidly through the region of Zaraphath and Sidon. IN THE OTHER STORY, from Luke Chapter 7, the people in the village of Nain began to praise the Lord, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us! God has looked with favor upon us!" In both stories, the name of God is glorified. In both stories, the power of God is acknowledged. In both stories, the word of God is spread. For only God can take the most hopeless and helpless of situations and bring LIFE and HOPE and JOY. For only God can give us the miraculous gift of FAITH.

**7. Let me come full circle -- to the present day. Sooner or later, all of us will face desperate moments, moments when we are not even able to cry out for help. Moments when we are alone, confronting within ourselves the fears and uncertainties of our own mortality.** Sooner or later, we will enter those painful moments at the death of a family member, or friend, or co-worker, or neighbor. We will face the fact that we are TOTALLY unable to stop death from happening, to prevent the inevitability of this terminal existence we all share called LIFE. But we must also bring to mind the GREAT AND MIRACULOUS GIFT OF FAITH . . . FAITH IN GOD, AND FAITH IN GOD'S HOLY SON JESUS. Faith is more powerful than death. For FAITH has already overcome death. Faith has transformed death from a final destination into a majestic doorway into paradise. Faith in God, working in and through us, can still move mountains. Mountains of fear. Mountains of sorrow. Mountains of despair. Faith in God, working in and through us, can bring HOPE and JOY to others who are in the midst of sorrow, pain, and confusion. Faith in God, working in and through us, can still work miracles. Miracles of laughter. Miracles of compassion. Miracles of empathy. Miracles of joy.

As much as we try to deny it, death is absolutely and overwhelmingly unavoidable. And we are ultimately powerless to stop it. But there is a force more powerful than death. A force that is available to us all. It is a force known as faith. Faith in God and faith in God's holy Son, Jesus. Through faith, death is no longer our final resting place. Our final resting place is in the arms of our Lord.