

Blogging toward Sunday

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It's clear that Luke's desire is to write an "orderly account"; he has an agenda, is out to prove something, and his writing occasionally seems a bit contrived and predictable. If this story were only about Luke crossing things off his list—one, two, three, four prophecies fulfilled, or to make some point about Jesus being like Elisha but greater than Elisha because Jesus merely speaks and the dead rise—then it would be about as compelling as crossing things off a grocery list. What's interesting, however, is that the desire for order and clarity, the intent to provide the reader with certainty and security (1:4) sometimes meshes and sometimes *doesn't* mesh with the outrageous liveliness of the Gospel he's trying to articulate. We learn Luke's system and at the same time glimpse things that are "unsystematizable."

The text points to the Elijah and Elisha narratives. I like these strange, detailed narratives. Elijah carries the widow's dead son up into his room and stretches himself out over the boy three times. Elisha puts his mouth on the mouth of the Shunammite woman's dead son, his eyes on the boy's eyes, his palms on the boy's palms, and breathes into him. The oddness and physicality of these resurrections make them feel intimate and vulnerable. In the official narratives about kings and governments and power, where things often appear black and white, these prophets live in the houses of pagan women, heal the enemy, perform strange little miracles for "unimportant" people. Elijah may mock the prophets of Baal, but in the narrative immediately preceding his confrontation with the Baal worshipers, he is fed and housed by one—then brings her son back to life.

When Jesus brings the widow's son back to life, the people are seized with fear. After all, we expect death—it defines the order of the world. But now death—something fixed, that we can count on, that we know—is unfixed. No wonder people are scared! How do you categorize death being undone? There are no categories for it. James Alison says that with Jesus "the whole mechanism by which death retains people in

its thrall had been shown to be unnecessary. Whatever death is, it is not something which has to structure every human life from within (as in fact it does) but rather it is an empty shell, a bark without a bite" (*Raising Abel*). Resurrection forces us to revise our perceptual categories, our estimations of what is real, and question what normally orders our world. Resurrection unravels the logic, the structure, the systems we've come to believe in, the ground of our judgment (*our* systems and *our* judgment, not just *theirs*). It's frightening and unbelievably hopeful.

Jesus has compassion on the widow. Earlier Zechariah sung about how it was God's tender mercy that would save the people and bring peace. It's not math that will do it, but something that happens deep "in the bowels" (from the Greek word *splagcna*) of God. Jesus doesn't just take the widow's needs seriously, he takes them into the core of his being and makes her pain his own. It's not the kind of activity that makes for a smooth running machine. Compassion is not about boundaries and rational detachment. Brueggeman calls it a radical threat to the numbness maintained by the dominant order, and says that it's not "triumphant indignation" that will "undermine the world of competence and competition," but "passion and compassion" (*The Prophetic Imagination*). The stories of Elisha and Elijah and Jesus suggest that radical change requires passion and compassion for our political and personal and religious enemies. Compassion isn't formulaic or predictable or tidy or even rational—yet it is perhaps the only thing that can save us.