

1 Kings 17:17-24, John 1:14
Carry On
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12-30-18

Well once again, good morning to you on the Eve of New Years Eve. I have actually come to really love this time of year, this sort of unaccounted for gap week between Christmas and New Year's when things happen at a different pace. I love this season of reflection and new beginnings, the anticipation of days lengthening and spring on the way, and of course the Football Games. Notre Dame Comment...

This is also now the season of Christmastide, as of last Monday, so the good news is you can put away your Advent Music, and listen to the festive music of Christmas. By a show of hands, how many of you have been listening to Christmas Music since Thanksgiving, and are just done with it? Reason #37 why you too should follow the liturgical calendar.

This is also a great time of year to recognize all that God has done in our midst this year. We've lost some (Virginia McSpadden,), we have welcomed new ones into this world and into our church, we've been through a lot this year together as a family, and felt the pride of successes, and the ache of discouragement. This is the church, our life together, it's joyful, and messy, difficult, and profound all at the same time.

And as I was getting ready for this message, I thought what is God wanting us, as his gathered people here at WPC, to take away from this event-filled year? And what of this year can we carry with us? What is the universally translatable lesson for our life together in faith in Jesus Christ?

Well we've already got a taste of it with our Old Testament reading about Elijah, and we'll continue in a moment with a short reading from the Gospel of John. The life that God has for you is one in which you allow God to place you in the path of others so that your life may be stretched out for their sake. This is what a blessed life, a Jesus oriented life looks like.

So let's look together at John chapter 1 verse 14, and I'll be reading from Eugene Peterson's Message Paraphrase of the Bible.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

In theological terminology we call this the incarnation. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, condescending among us, becoming like us in form and flesh. Incarnating himself among us. And I love the way Eugene Peterson phrases this, the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

And not just any neighborhood, Jesus moves into your neighborhood.

We had an interesting encounter this week. Of course it's Winter Vacation this week and the kids are off from school and our nanny is away on vacation, and so of course all of our kids promptly get

sick. Thursday morning Amy went out for Gatorade and on her way back, as she's driving up our street she sees a woman standing in the middle of the road, without shoes, clothes out of place, muddied as if she had fallen in the creek, and with her was a FedEx driver.

The deliveryman flagged Amy down and asked if she could help, the woman was elderly and very clearly suffered from significant dementia. Which meant that we didn't know where she belonged, it could have been anywhere. And having a route to continue this man was unwilling to put this woman in his van to help her find her way home, so Amy was able to get her in the car and drive around the neighborhood, where luckily she spotted this woman's husband and caretaker frantically looking for her.

Moving into the neighborhood, to extend life to a woman in need, even if it meant allowing her soiled clothing to get on the interior of the car.

Throughout his life and ministry Jesus regularly extended the boundaries of compassion and forgiveness, extending himself to people for whom, according to Torah law, he had no cultural or religious responsibility. **EXAMPLES OF JESUS EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES...** But in first century Palestine, as Israel's population had already been mingled with what the New Testament calls *ta ethna* (The Nations).

Our Old Testament reading this morning we heard of Elijah, one of God's greatest in a line of prophets extending himself to a widow's son. But it's interesting to see how Elijah got there.

A few verses earlier Elijah is introduced to us, rather abruptly. Elijah was from the area of Gilead, which is in between Galilee and the Dead Sea, to the east of the Jordan River, and he was a prophet. Now a Prophet doesn't just mean that he can predict the future, but more importantly he has a keen ear to God's Voice and is able to speak on God's behalf to a people who may not be listening.

In verse 1 Elijah says to the evil King Ahab "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." And knowing this would not be a terribly popular word, the Spirit then sent Elijah away into the wilderness where he camped by a river. There he was fed by ravens morning and night until the river finally dried up.

Then God's word came to him again, telling him to go to a town called Zerephath which is north and over along the coast, deep in the heart of Pagan worship country. There a woman had been commanded to receive him, but when he meets them, she and her son are a day away from dying. Their food has run out. But Elijah says "don't be afraid." That's something that God would say right? Don't be afraid, don't be afraid. Your jug of oil will never run dry. She did what he said and the jug of oil and the jar of meal were not emptied, because the word of the Lord had spoken.

This, then, is where we pick up today's reading. Elijah has been sometime with the woman and her son, and he becomes ill. There, in the home of this foreign family, who very likely did not worship Yahweh, Elijah takes this dead boy in his arms carries him upstairs, crying out to the Lord, and then stretches himself out over the boy three times, crying out "Let this child's life come into him again." And the Lord listened to him; and the life returned to the boy and he was revived.

This is what happens throughout the Old and New Testaments, the word of God came first to God's people the Israelites, and when they do not receive it, the word continues to go out among

the people everywhere. God's word will not be limited, and is forever moving out into the neighborhoods, into the nations.

But at this point in his career as a prophet, Elijah is still pretty fresh. We might even say that he is a little immature in his understanding of God. He cries out: My God why have you brought calamity upon this widow with whom I am saying.

I liken this to a well known person, a celebrity perhaps who has a sudden and remarkable turn to faith, and immediately we put them up on a pedestal and expect them to speak maturely on behalf of the Christian Community. But in reality they are works in progress, they are not fully mature in their understanding of God—in fact none of us is, to the extent that God's mind and God's ways can be fully known.

Jesus faced this with his disciples in John Chapter 9 when they're walking along and they meet the blind man and his disciples ask: Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? And Jesus says, you guys, you're asking the wrong question. It's not a matter of someone sinning, he was born this way so that he might be the instrument through which God's glory and kindness might be revealed.

Instead of languishing in his questions for God over the justice and fairness of this young boy's death, Elijah has the sense to do exactly the right thing. The text says that "he stretched himself upon the child three times, crying out O Lord, let this child's life come into him again." Elijah, extends his life in compassion and intercession for this boy. Elijah lays himself down on another's behalf in service and compassion for this family who is without hope.

This is not the only time in the bible when something like this happens. Just a few chapters later in 2 Kings 4 Elisha, Elijah's protégé does almost the same thing. And then again in Acts chapter 20 is the story of Eutychus, the young man who literally falls asleep because Paul preaches to long and falls out the second story window and dies. But in each time when a life is in crisis, when a person's fate and future hangs in the balance, in these cases, the man of God stretches himself out on behalf of another, laying their own life down to restore another.

The point of these stories is not somehow to show us a formula for how to miraculously heal someone, or to raise someone from the dead. Laying your body down on top of someone who has stopped breathing is not a recipe for resuscitation. But rather, Elijah placed his life before this boy's, hand to hand, eye to eye, toe to toe, extending himself on his behalf and prays that God will do something. And God does something.

One way we lay our lives on top of another's is through prayer. Just a few weeks ago, Stan Walter brought to our attention a very serious prayer concern. Judge McCallen's nephew was in the ICU with an extremely dangerous and life-threatening condition—one from which he was not expected to recover. That morning we prayed. We lifted up prayers of intercession for him, along with many many others. And last week, we got word that Greg Ray walked out of the hospital. Prayer is one way we lay our lives upon each other's.

Another way in which our lives cover one another's, is when we literally allow our lives to intersect and overlap others. When our stories become entwined with someone else's.

Lisa Fenn was an ESPN producer, and in her words: “we’re always on the lookout for stories that inspire.” In 2009 she did a story on two high school wrestlers from inner-city Cleveland, Dartanyon Crockett and Leroy Sutton.

Dartanyon, effectively homeless, subsisting on soggy mozzarella sticks, bruised apples, and school lunches, was Lincoln’s best wrestler—he’s also legally blind. Leroy, on the other hand was injured in a train accident, which tore his legs from his body. These two young men who each had overwhelming obstacles entwined their lives with each other’s. Dartanyon, who was 5 foot 7 with muscles on top of muscles carried Leroy on his back wherever he went, at school, practice, home, basically anywhere there was no working elevator. Leroy, was Dartanyon’s eyes. The wrestler who couldn’t walk, was carried by the wrestler who couldn’t see.

But when Lisa came into their lives, spotlighting them as a part of her story all the way up to their graduation from a High School where less than 50% do so, not only did she tell their story, but she became the third strand in their cord of family and strength.

Video

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. Lisa Fenn was the living difference in Leroy and Dartanyon’s life. Elijah was the living difference, the tangible presence of the living God this woman from a pagan land and her dead son. And when he stretched himself out, when he laid his life before this boy, face to face, hand to hand, toe to toe, unimaginable things can happen.

When I think about the dawn of this new year, this is what I believe faithfulness and success in God’s eyes looks like, entwining our lives with others. Because as the poet of Ecclesiastes says, a chord of three strands is not easily broken. Amen.