

A Faith Stronger Than Death – 2 Kings 4:18-37

Pastor Colin Rieke – April 2, 2017

¹⁸ The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. ¹⁹ “My head! My head!” he said to his father. His father told a servant, “Carry him to his mother.” ²⁰ After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. ²¹ She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out. ²² She called her husband and said, “Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return.” ²³ “Why go to him today?” he asked. “It’s not the New Moon or the Sabbath.” “It’s all right,” she said. ²⁴ She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Lead on; don’t slow down for me unless I tell you.” ²⁵ So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, “Look! There’s the Shunammite! ²⁶ Run to meet her and ask her, ‘Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?’ ” “Everything is all right,” she said. ²⁷ When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.” ²⁸ “Did I ask you for a son, my lord?” she said. “Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes?’ ” ²⁹ Elisha said to Gehazi, “Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy’s face.” ³⁰ But the child’s mother said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So he got up and followed her. ³¹ Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy’s face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, “The boy has not awakened.” ³² When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. ³³ He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy’s body grew warm. ³⁵ Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. ³⁶ Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite.” And he did. When she came, he said, “Take your son.” ³⁷ She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

A man walks into his doctor’s office and tells the doctor that he has this particular rare, but fatal disease. The doctor scratches his head for a moment and then responds that the people that have this rare disease don’t even know they have it, because there are no symptoms for it. People who have the disease feel just fine. The patient urgently exclaimed to his doctor, that’s the problem, I feel just fine. Now I don’t know if there is such a disease like that, where those who have it exhibit no symptoms, but I

wouldn't be surprised if there would be some people so paranoid about contracting such a disease that they might act like the patient in that joke.

Whether or not we choose to be paranoid about our death, doesn't change the natural fear that people have for death. Even for Christians, the remnants of that natural fear still remain (you see this exhibited in funeral homes and memorial services), because as much as we know what is coming on the other side of death, it's still something that we haven't experienced before, and that makes many, if not all people uncomfortable. That's because death is the ultimate consequence. Death is the ultimate consequence, the undeniable result of the sin not only in the world, but in ourselves.

Nobody knows from experience what death is like, because we have not personally talked with someone who has risen from the dead. So everyone must have some faith, or belief of what is going to happen after death. This can be a religious belief of some heavenly life after death, or it can be an areligious belief of non-existence after death. Each person has faith in their particular belief. But the wrong assumption to make is that all beliefs – all faiths – are equal. Because in the end, either there will be something after death, or there won't be something after death, there can't be both. So what is it that keeps a Christian going? It is having A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH.

1. Than the death that surrounds us
2. Than the death that envelops us

(1)

Now a favorite and well-known story regarding the fate of death is from our gospel this morning with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. It is a great and wonderful reminder of the power that Jesus had not only over nature, but over death itself. But Jesus was not the first person to raise someone from the dead, God had already worked through his messengers in the Old Testament to accomplish the very same thing. One of those times happened to be in our first lesson this morning from 2 Kings. It is in this extended account that we get to pull back the curtain on a woman of great faith. A faith that exemplifies what being a Christian, being a believer is all about. Because she had A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH.

That's saying something when you understand the times in which this woman and Elisha the prophet were living. This was later in the history of the 10 northern tribes of Israel, and one of the messages of Elisha was for the Israelites to turn away from foreign gods and worship the Lord. As we've been looking at in our Sunday morning Bible class, many of the kings of Israel were morally wicked men – not only allowing the worship of foreign gods, but promoting it as well. And yet, despite this lack of faith in much of Israel, the town in which this woman lived, the town of Shunem, seems to have been a beacon of light shining in Israel.

The earlier verses in 2 Kings 4 give the connection that this Shunammite woman had with Elisha. Apparently during his travels, Elisha went to the town of Shunem, and this woman demonstrated her faith in the Lord and his prophet that she offered to host him during his travels. So devoted was this woman, that she even prepared a guest room for him on the flat roof of her house, allowing Elisha to come and go as he pleased. In response to this generosity, Elisha blessed the woman, prophesying that

she would have a son (apparently until this time, she had been childless). It is this son who is the center of the account from our first lesson this morning.

When the boy was several years old, he was out helping his father reaping in the fields. It was there that presumably he was struck with sun-stroke which became so severe that he died later that day. It is here that the faith of the Shunammite woman was tested. How many times have you heard in a time like this someone blaming God for what had happened? How many times have you heard “the worst thing is for a parent to bury their own child?” But what does this Shunammite woman do? She went upstairs, placed the boy on the guest bed she kept prepared for Elisha, and calls for a donkey to go and see the prophet. There was no complaining, or really any outward show of emotion, she didn’t even tell her husband why she needed to go see Elisha.

She set out on a donkey and made the 30 mile journey to find Elisha, who was known to teach on Mt. Carmel. Even when Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, greeted her at the base of Mt. Carmel, she still kept her emotions in check. She knew who she wanted to see, she knew who would have the answer in her time of distress. It was Elisha. And when she reached Elisha, she got off her donkey and fell down at his feet. Then, and only then did she pour out her soul to Elisha, laying her sorrow at Elisha’s feet, and asking what he might do about it. Now, don’t mistake this for the Shunammite woman blaming Elisha for the death of her son, but instead knowing that she can go to Elisha for help. She had A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH that surrounded her, she knew where to go.

So Elisha followed the woman back to her home, he ascended the stairs to his upper guest room, and then shut the door. Instead of just assuming that as a prophet, or messenger of God he could do such a great miracle, he recognized where his strength and authority lay, it lay in the hands of an all-powerful God. **“He prayed to the Lord.”** We don’t hear if the Lord answered him directly, but then Elisha set about trying to revive the boy. While the actions of Elisha to bring back the dead boy might have gotten him thrown in prison today, know that this was Elisha’s way of bringing life back into the boy. Lo and behold, Elisha’s stretching out upon the boy was the miracle that God used to bring the boy back from the dead. It was then that Elisha returned the boy to his mother.

What are we able to take from this account that happened a few hundred years before Jesus himself walked this earth? We can admire the faith of this unnamed Shunammite woman, who had A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH, stronger than the death that surrounded her. It was stronger than the death of her son, because instead of straining her relationship with God, it brought her relationship closer, she knew where to turn. Do we know to turn to the same place when the death of a loved one is staring us in the face?

Death is the great equalizer. Death is the great enemy. One of the devil and death’s powerful delusions is to turn it back against God, to blame God for not stopping it from happening. It’s as if we expect God to have all of us live forever. But that’s the crazy thing. He does want us to live forever! If we go back to the beginning, God created everything good and perfect. He placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and gave them fruit from the Tree of Life, which gave them life forever. It was only after they were tempted and ate fruit from the forbidden tree that God no longer wanted them to eat from the Tree of Life. What reason did he give? God said, **“He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”**

Do you see the reason God didn't want Adam and Eve to live forever? Do you see the reason God doesn't want us to live forever? God doesn't want us to live forever in sin. God doesn't want us to live forever in pain and suffering, with anger and lust and greed and selfishness ruining everything good. This is why death is not only the consequence for our rebellion against a holy God, but God also uses death to bring about a new life.

This is a new life that is only brought about by faith. This is a new life that is only brought about by believing in the wonderful promise of a Savior like this Shunammite woman. This is a new life that is only brought about by letting go of anything you do as being good enough to earn it. This is a new life that is brought about only by God. This is what makes this A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH.

The faith that you have in your heart did not come about as a decision that you made for God, it did not come about by accident. The faith that you have in your heart came about by the Holy Spirit working in you to believe that a man named Jesus lived a perfect life, credited that to you, and then died in your place, all so that you could be in heaven with him. Because this faith is not from us but from God, it is A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH.

This is why the Shunammite woman did not lash out at God or Elisha, but rather knew where to turn when faced with death that surrounded her. This is the comfort we can take today as believers also. And what a comfort that is knowing that our FAITH IS STRONGER THAN DEATH, knowing that when we are surrounded by death, whether that be the death of a loved one or a friend, our faith reminds us where to turn. What a comfort that is knowing that when we come closer to facing our death, we don't have to worry, we don't have to stress. Because we have A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH. Our faith will see us through death to the other side. It's another side that we don't have to wonder what will face us, because our faith rests in God.

When you think about it, death is our ultimate enemy. It is the enemy that eventually will catch up to us. But just think about what having A FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH actually means? It means we have something stronger than our ultimate enemy. We have a faith that stands firm in the face of death, knowing that death does not have the final say, because it did not have the final say with Jesus. What comfort and confidence this gives us in this life. The comfort of knowing our ultimate enemy has been defeated, and the confidence to go out and share this FAITH STRONGER THAN DEATH. Amen.