

Today's story of Elijah the Prophet comes from a difficult time in Israel's history. There was a terrible drought and famine in the land and Elijah the prophet was on the run from Ahab the king and his wicked wife, Queen Jezebel. When things looked bleak word of the Lord came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there." Zarephath was located in the heart of pagan territory. In fact, it was not far from Queen Jezebel's home town. It was an unlikely place for Elijah to hide out. Then God said something else to Elijah that was equally as unlikely: "I have directed a widow there to supply you with food."

This sounds counter-intuitive because nobody struggled more during a time of drought and famine than widows. There was no government help, no food stamps, no organized charities. Widows could barely provide for themselves. Elijah was certainly thinking that a pagan town and a widow with little resources could not possibly be of much help. But he went where God told him to go. And that is an important lesson for all of us. **If God tells you to do something or to go somewhere, then get a move on.**

There is a well-known story about a weak and sickly man who was unable to afford a doctor. He lived in the deep back woods in an old log cabin. In front of his cabin was a huge boulder. One night he had a vision in which God told him to go out and push the massive rock in front of his home all day long, day after day, until God told him to stop. The man got up early the next morning and did what he was told. He pushed on the rock as long as he could. Each day he pushed a little harder and a little

longer. Day after day he pushed. Days rolled into weeks, and weeks into months, as he faithfully pushed against the rock. After several months of pushing this rock, however, the man was getting tired. He began to doubt that his vision came from God. He decided to measure how far he had been able to move the rock during these months . . . and he discovered he had not budged it at all.

The man sunk into despair, sat on his porch and cried, because he had invested so much time for nothing. But as the sun was setting, God spoke again, "Son, why are you so sad?" The man replied, "Lord, You know how sick and weak I am, and then the vision you gave me built up a false hope. I have pushed with all that was within me for many months, and that old rock is right where it was when I started."

God said to him, "I never told you to move the rock, I told you to push against the rock." God told the man to step in front of the mirror and look at himself. The man did so and was amazed. He had been so sickly and weak, but now what he saw in the mirror was a strong muscular man. And it dawned on him that he had been feeling better for months, and it was all because he had been pushing the rock. Suddenly the man understood that the plan of God was not to change the position of the rock, but to change him. Our task is not to understand what God is seeking to accomplish. Our task is to cooperate and be surprised by what God can do.

Back to Elijah. Even though it seemed like a bad idea he did what he was told. He found the widow and asked for a drink of water and bit of food. And amazingly she did it.

She and her son were starving and getting ready for their last meal. Elijah makes her a seemingly impossible promise – help me and you will always have enough to eat. Even though this pagan widow has no experience of Elijah’s God, she did as Elijah told her. She used her last resources to provide for this prophet who was not even of her faith. Then something even more astounding happened--the food and the oil kept coming, just as Elijah had said. There was food every day for the woman and her son, as well as for Elijah. Hallelujah! This poor widow probably thought. Life is going to work out after all. I may be poor and times may be hard, but Someone is looking out for me.

But then the story takes a plot twist. Her precious son became seriously ill. He grew worse and worse, until one day he finally stopped breathing altogether. The distraught widow said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sins and kill my son?” That’s very telling. She shared an attitude that was very prevalent in biblical times. Her son was sick and therefore she felt she was being punished for some sin she had committed by having her son taken away from her. There are still lots of people who think like that today. How sad. They believe in mean, vengeful god who simply doesn’t exist – that isn’t how the God we know operates.

Elijah proves that to her by calling on his God and then returning her son to her alive and well. When people do what God asks, however improbable or even apparently crazy then God can be at work in their lives and unexpected wonders can happen. And that brings us to the gospel.

This widow and her friends probably did not appreciate the interruption – who were these strangers to disturb their grief? This man, some sort of preacher, actually stopped their funeral procession and had the nerve to walk right up and touch the lifeless body of the young man too soon taken from his mother. She could have gone into a rage, freaked out but she did what Jesus asked. It was odd, even disturbing but it was necessary. Without interrupting their journey, life would not win out over death.

Ok, those are great stories but how often does that happen – people coming back to life. More often than you would think – and I don't just mean the rare medical revival.

How many of you have ever gone to your high school reunions? When we were young we were going to change the world: our ideals focused on helping the needy, our dreams were for a better world. But see those same people at their 20th, 30th, 40th reunion. Now with commitments to marriage and family and career, dinner conversations are more likely to revolve around interest rates and the housing market, we worry about whether to get an SUV or a hybrid, we fear that a bad economy will wipe out our retirement plans.

Within these good people something has died. Within all of us there is always the shadow of death. What has died within us? The ability to forgive? A healthy dose of ambition? A concern for the good of our community? A commitment to our faith? Those are painful questions to reflect on and we are afraid to hear the answers.

It is always painful to mourn a loss, especially when it is a part of ourselves that we mourn, when characteristics we were once proud of seem to have faded away. But as the gospel reminds us, it can sometimes happen that this loss and mourning can be interrupted. Something might force us to change our plans and re-evaluate our course in life. If we are willing to let the lord reach out and touch us at those moments, then once again life can triumph over death. We all face times when life seems to be crumbling around us and our dreams have been shattered. The gospel claims that even at such times there can be good news for us. Those may be precisely the times we can come face-to-face with the risen lord – usually working through the people around us who are speaking words of hope and pointing out new possibilities for life.

Author Catherine Marshall tells about how devastated she was when she was informed that she had tuberculosis. She was not mentally prepared for that. No one ever is. She was ordered to bed 24 hours a day indefinitely. Fifteen months later, there was no noticeable progress. It was at this point that tormenting thoughts began inundating her mind. Had she committed some unforgivable sin at some time in her life? Had she wronged someone and needed to make things right with them? Was there something about her life so offensive to God that her prayers were being short-circuited? What could she do? She apologized to her husband for everything she could think to apologize for. She wrote acquaintances and purged her conscience. What else could she do? Finally, one day she conceded defeat. She had run out of ideas.

She had fought and struggled, and worried until there was nothing left. In her diary, she wrote this prayer: "From this moment I promise that I'll try to do whatever you tell me for the rest of my life, insofar as you'll make it clear to me what your wishes are. I'm weak and many times I'll probably renege on this. But Lord, you'll have to help me with that too." That was the moment of surrender. She got out of the way. Within six weeks, her condition improved until she was taking walks, working in the garden, making jelly, and eventually resumed her "normal life."

Catherine Marshall's story – and ours - may be summarized in these words: God can, if we will let him.