

1Kings 17:17 Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

¹⁹ “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰Then he cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” ²¹Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this boy’s life return to him!”

²²The LORD heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived.

²³Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!”

²⁴Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth.”

STANDING ON THE PORCH

Dear Friends In Christ,

Standing on the porch looking at the door—it wasn’t something I enjoyed doing, but I had to. Every door was different. Some had doorbells. You had to knock on others. But whether knocking or ringing the doorbell, I was always standing on the porch asking for money. That was me at age 12. You see, I was a paperboy. I wasn’t “begging” for money. We had an agreement. I would get up early in the morning, ride my bike around town in the dark (without helmet or lights back in those days—don’t know how I survived). I would get on that bike whether it was 60 degrees or 6 degrees (my dad agreed to drive me around in a car when it got below zero). I would deliver a paper to their doorstep and at the end of every two weeks they would pay me.

But even though we had an agreement and I had a just claim on that money, I never liked standing on those porches. Oh, some people were nice enough. Most were. But I was a little less than welcome at other doors. I didn’t understand. I was just twelve. You know... Bills bigger than the income; can’t pay the mortgage, trouble paying the electric; kids need new clothes, or even second hand clothes; and now there are even twelve-year olds standing on the porch threatening to stop the paper. *Now* I can see why some people weren’t happy to see me.

When standing on the porch at places like that, I would usually take a second or two before I knocked. I kept hoping maybe the world would end, or it would start to rain, or whatever.

That apprehension I felt when standing on the porch, wondering what would happen when that door opened, I think that is sort of related to our saying, “at death’s doorstep.” At the time when the last breath is about to leave one we love, it’s about like standing on the unfriendly porch of an unfriendly house. We know something unpleasant is about to happen. A door will open, someone will be called, and there will be nothing we can do about it.

I. The Feeling of Loss

The widow of our reading knew about standing at death’s doorstep.

If you like rollercoasters, maybe you would have liked her life. She had known the magic of dreams. She had been married. She and her husband had a child. She also knew what shattering dreams sound like. While young, her husband died. In our reading, she was a widow – probably a young widow in her 20’s or maybe early 30’s. A few years after that heartbreak, she knew the thrill of

winning the lottery, so to speak. One day in the middle of a famine, a prophet of the LORD God stopped at her house. He asked for a bite to eat, and though she had almost no food in her house she still made a meal for him, and then—in the middle of doing the prep work for the prophet’s meal—the LORD decreed that her jar of flour and bottle of oil would not run out until the famine was over. She and her son buffeted by this harsh world, suddenly knew the joy of hope: food in a famine.

But good times do not last forever. Bereft once, of her husband, this widow again stood at death’s doorstep. This time she stood there with her only child. Her boy was sick. He got worse and worse. And she prayed harder and harder. She stopped doing the work around the place, the dishes piled up in the sink, the dust gathered in the corners. And she prayed and she prayed. And then she just plain forgot about the dishes and the dust and she attended to her son, the only light left in her life, and he was dimming. Holding him in her arms, she stood at death’s doorstep, hoping to fend off the unwelcome stranger. And then it happened, while she held him close.

I remember when it happened in my life—my grandfather—I was in the room. He was 90 years old. He had been revived twice. After they revived him the second time, he was mad at the nurses about it. He asked why they didn’t just let him rest. Now he was on a ventilator in the hospital, and I was in the room. *Hffff-whooosh* went the ventilator, *hffff-whooosh*. And then it happened. It just stopped, and I started crying. I didn’t think I would. He wanted to go. He knew his Savior. He had said his good-byes, but I couldn’t stop. And that was for a 90 year old man who was tired and ready to go to his Maker.

I can’t imagine this mother. In her arms she felt the sudden stillness. His last breath had gone. Her last joy gone. I can’t imagine, but some of you can. You know what it is like to lose the light of your life, the one who was still supposed to be strong and full of life when they laid *your* mortal clay into the earth. It happened the wrong way ’round.

And if you have been *there*, you can understand why this woman bereft of the sun and the moon of her life said what she said to God’s prophet, even if he was a man of God: ***“What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”*** Did I tell you, she was still holding the boy in her arms. She didn’t say it with dry eyes or an even tone. If she had, she would have been less than human.

And the prophet couldn’t say anything, except the sort of thing we say at times like those. He said a foolish thing. But when we share a profound grief we all say things we shouldn’t, and we promise things we have no business promising. And Elijah said, ***“Give me your son.”*** “Elijah, what right do you have to give someone hope where there is none?” I want to yell at him.

And Elijah took that child upstairs and he prayed. In his prayer he said the same thing to God that the widow said to him. Now, I am not much of one to criticize different Bible translations, but this is one place I think we need to ignore the NIV and listen to the King James translation because this is really what the Hebrew prophet said: ***“And [Elijah] cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?”*** Did you hear the prophet talking to God? “O Lord my God, you have done an evil thing to this woman! You have murdered her son!” He had been on the porch too! He had seen the door open. He saw the dear son of a dear woman taken, and they were left, and he was shaken!

Jesus, too, came face to face with death. And while that perfect man never blamed or accused God (for that most certainly is a sinful lack of faith), Jesus still felt the overwhelming sorrow we feel when we stand at death’s doorstep. He shared our grief watching the funeral procession for the son of another widow. We read, ***“When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her”*** (Luke 7:13). And at another time when he reached the tomb of his friend Lazarus, he burst into tears. More than once, standing at death’s doorstep, Jesus flinched.

There once was a funeral where the preacher told the people that they shouldn't be crying. It makes me wonder if that preacher had ever stood on that porch, death's doorstep. I wonder what that preacher would have told Jesus when he saw Jesus cry at Lazarus' tomb.

II. The Feeling of Hope

But back to Elijah. So Elijah took the child up to his room and he prayed and a miracle happened: God returned life to the boy. The prophet took the child back downstairs and presented him to his mother. And the tears just kept on flowing, but now a different flavor.

And Jesus did this too. Jesus seeing that young man in his coffin, and his mourning mother, he too raised a young man from the dead. While Elijah could only plead with the LORD to raise the widow's son, Jesus could issue the command, "*Young man, I say to you, get up!*"

You know, there is something about this text that makes me uneasy. It always has. In fact, sometimes I avoid—I almost run away from—these Bible readings at the time of a funeral. I am afraid of reading these texts because I am afraid of people not understanding. "There goes that preacher again, talking about kids getting raised from the dead, and widows receiving their dead back. Well, we all know that isn't going to happen here. I wish he would just be quiet." Death has claimed someone's life. That fact won't be revoked in this world. No matter how tragic the death, how promising the life, how young the child.

That is not the point. The point isn't about stopping our sadness now. If that were the point, then each of us would be very unhappy. For people don't get their dead back. The end is the end.

The real meaning behind Elijah returning this boy to his mother is about hope for tomorrow. It is the assurance that God really can bring the dead back to life, that he really does hold the key to death (Revelation 1:18). Jesus our Savior said to us, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies*" (John 11:25). "*...even though he dies.*" Jesus has promised that to those who believe in him, death is only the beginning of something better than anything we have known on earth. Escape from death is just that easy – believe in him. Cast all your sins on him. Trust in him for forgiveness. Believe on him for life. He has the power to raise us for life.

The Bible's message is not, "Don't cry." It says, "*Do not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). When death separates, yes, we can cry. Like a wife who kisses her husband good-bye when deployed for 13 months overseas. Like a father who, with moist eyes, hugs his children for the last time till this time next year. That's the crying that we can do when death separates us. Death is difficult, it saddens. But it is temporary. God has the power to raise all know Jesus to eternal life. That was the point of what God did through Elijah. As the widow herself said, "*Now I know that the word of the LORD from your mouth is truth*" (24).

There I was, standing on the doorstep, ringing the doorbell. But this time was different. It was not the house of a surly customer about to tell the twelve-year old paperboy to come back some other time. Standing on this porch I soon expected to see a different face behind the screen door. One who had given the best years of his life so that my life would be a success, who continued to be interested in me and to pray for and to hope for me. You see, the porch I was on was home. And in a second the face I would see behind the screen door would not be a paper route customer, but my father. And I would be welcomed into my father's house.

We may say "death's doorstep." But we are mistaken in saying that. Death doesn't own the house. Death is only the threshold, the point of entry, to a house that belongs to our heavenly Father. In his house there will be only joy. Amen.