

The eighth day: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 30; Luke 7:11-17

by [Kathryn Greene-McCreight](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

The Bible is full of strange things—oil cruets and flour containers that never become empty and young bodies that are restored to life at a word from Jesus. Are we supposed to believe that these things happened? Maybe the ancient peoples did, but we moderns suffer under the curse of Bultmann's lightbulb: we know why the light switches on. It is no miracle. Do ax heads really float? Do bushes really burn without being burned up? Are the dead really raised? We are cursed by rationalities that prevent us from seeing the Bible as one overarching story in which our own lives play a key role.

I wish the lectionary had paired Luke 7:11-17 with the story in 1 Kings 17:17-24, of Elijah raising the widow's son from death. In that pairing we see clearly how Elijah functioned as a type "of the One to come"—of Christ. We see that while Elijah plays prophets' tricks to raise the widow's son, Jesus has only to say one word: "Rise." Elijah is the figure expected to usher in this Messiah, the one for whom the door is left open at Passover and for whom a place is set at the table. He comes again in the New Testament as John the Baptist, who announces the Coming One's arrival.

In 1 Kings 17:8-16, we meet the widow of Zarephath, who is leading a difficult, desperate life, as did most widows in the Bible. These women were completely disenfranchised when they lost their husbands, and many were reduced to homelessness and begging. The widow of Zarephath finds Elijah's request for bread difficult to grant—she only has a bit of flour left, and when Elijah appears, she is gathering sticks for the firewood for her family's last meal "that we may eat and die." (Who says that the Old Testament has no sense of humor?)

She intends to knead the meal into loaves for her son, but instead she fills the prophet's request and receives a prophet's reward: Elijah announces that by the word of the Lord the meal will not run out and the oil jug will not run dry until the rains come again. The upshot of this scene is that the God of Israel sustains even through famine and want, over against the silence and inactivity of Baal.

The widow responds to the triptych of stories in chapter 17 with what is meant to be the reader's response as well: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." The truth of the God of Israel conquers the false mythology of Baal: God has power over life and death, fertility and sterility, plenty and want.

Like that God, Jesus is not afraid of death and ritual impurity, but is Lord even over these things. Compassion rules the scene in Luke 7. Jesus touches the bier, violating the law of ritual purity that would keep a faithful Jew from contact with the dead. Instead of praying to God, Jesus states, with a new authority even over death, "Rise!" The people acclaim him, but as a prophet, since they do not fully understand the difference between Jesus and a prophet like Elijah, much like many of the disciples throughout the Gospels.

Endless meal and flowing oil? A young man resuscitated? Suspend disbelief for a moment to ask what such acts might mean. Of course, these prophetic miracles apparently are performed only to come apart at the seams later: the widows and their sons eventually will die. But the miracles point to that eighth day, the day of resurrection, of life eternal, when every tear will be wiped away. In the words of the psalmist, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning," that morning when the Sun of Righteousness arises. Both mothers weep for themselves and their sons in their poverty and distress, but in the morning light, at the hand of God they both receive life.

Both of my parents died last August. It fell to my husband, my brother and me to clear out their cottage. I came across a large photo of my father, who was a pastor for 60 years of his life. It was a candid shot, taken first thing in the morning on a parish retreat. He is sitting up in bed in his pajamas, against his pillows and half-covered by blankets. His hair is sleep-tousled, and in his hands he cradles his first precious cup of coffee of the day. The morning sun filters through the curtain. Under the photo is inscribed a caption: "Joy cometh in the morning."

That caption reminds me of my father's faith and of mine in the God who has compassion on the nobodies of society, who feeds the hungry, and who with one word commands the dead man at Nain to live again. This is the God who raised Jesus to live forever, so that death no longer has its sting. When we look on our own lives, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

So do axe heads float? Do bushes burn without being consumed? In our scientific world, apparently not. But for those who wrote these stories of starving widows being fed and dying men being resuscitated, these questions miss the point. Does our God really have the power to do these awe-inspiring things? Is God a "God of the eighth day," who steps back and does not intervene again in that creation? Who gives no meal, oil, coffee or sign of the inbreaking of resurrection? Or do we live with a constant and compelling hope that leads us to stretch out our hands to that day when tears will be no more?