

Blogging toward Sunday (Acts 9:36-43)

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In this new series, authors offer reflections on the Sunday lectionary texts. Feel free to join the discussion by adding your thoughts.

The structure of this narrative—the miraculous move from death to life—is clear and unambiguous. It is an epitome of the truth of the gospel that God—in Christ—has transformed the world toward well-being. It is indeed a “miracle,” which means that it is an inscrutable, inexplicable happening beyond all of our categories of explanation. The preacher’s task is not to explain (or explain away), but to witness to the concrete claim of the wonder that God’s power, in this instance, was decisive for life in the world.

This narrative, like every biblical narrative, is set in the midst of other biblical narratives. We can read backward:

- Behind this narrative is the narrative of Mark 5:35-43 that it surely echoes. In that narrative it is Jesus who utters the commanding words, “Little girl, get up.” That utterance changes the world. The utterance of Peter in Acts 9:40 *echoes the utterance of Jesus.*
- Behind the narrative of Jesus in Mark 5 there is the narrative of Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24) and the narrative of Elisha (2 Kings 4:32-37). In these strange stories the “surge” of the power for life, entrusted consistently to human agents, transforms the world.
- And behind all of these stories of Peter, Jesus, Elisha and Elijah there is the raw liturgical report of God’s own capacity to enter a world of negation and work newness. At the very outset, God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), and the world of chaos came to fruit-bearing order. The utterances of Peter (and of Jesus) are commensurate with the utterance of the creator on that first day amid the mass of

chaos. In all of these utterances, it is authoritative speech that matters decisively. It is the peculiar claim of these narratives that *the power of God for life* has been peculiarly entrusted to particular persons. Obviously Elijah and Elisha are peculiar in the Old Testament, endlessly subversive and “outside the box” in their transformative capacity. It is equally obvious, of course, that in the New Testament Jesus is entrusted with the word of life that renews the world.

So consider Peter. If we refer to the authorization of Peter in Matthew 16:18, we have a beginning. In a more “catholic” reading, Peter is the head of the church. In a more “evangelical” reading, the “rock” is Peter’s unshakable faith in Jesus. Taken either way, Peter, in our narrative, is an epitome of the authority and capacity and mission of the church. Peter, now the embodiment of the church, enters the room where there is a smell of death. He prays. He engages the body. He utters his commanding imperative. And life is given, life that is, in verse 41, celebrated by saints and widows.

The wonder is witnessed and attested only by saints and widows. What a pair! The saints are those who did not flee from the smell of death. The widows are those who live every day in their vulnerability, at the edge of death. They are the only witnesses. The non-saints, the ones who fear death, were gone and did not stay to see the miracle. The anti-widows, the ones who work death on the weak, were not there. It takes a certain kind of witness to see the newness! They stayed in the chamber of death and were there for the surprising gift of new life.

Clearly the narrative attests that Peter—the church—is entrusted with the resurrection power of Jesus who himself carries the force of the creator God. The church is entrusted with the power to create new life. . .bodily, concretely, locally. It is no wonder that in the Book of Acts, the church is always before imperial authority, for the capacity to bring life out of death threatens every status quo.

In the Gospel reading, the works of Christ testify that Jesus is the Messiah, the works of new life that Jesus enacts everywhere (John 10:25). But many do not believe the testimony, because they are inured to the old arrangements of death and despair. But “my sheep” are the ones who “follow me.” The church stays close to Jesus, and so follows Jesus, not only in being obedient, but also in dispensing the miraculous power for life. The church continues to do what Jesus has done in order to make the world new.

The ones who do that, the faithful, empowered church, have “eternal life,” a quality of bold freedom in the world (John 10:27). Perhaps that “eternal life” was already signified in the life of “Tabitha” (Dorcas) who was “devoted to good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36). She already knew, in her daily round, about “eternal life.” Now the whole body of saints and widows, attached to the narrative, is invited to live that life with her, close to Jesus, agents and recipients of new life!