

Scriptures: Rev. 4:8-11; 2 Kings 4:8-37

Holy, Holy, Holy!

As we continue our series, “Lift Every Voice,” we’ve already heard three of our favorite hymns this morning. “Open the Eyes of My Heart,” written by Paul Baloche, and made popular in performances by Michael W. Smith, and “Holy, Holy, Holy!” by Anglican Bishop Reginald Heber are really great anthems of praise – and tie in nicely with the Scripture we looked at earlier from the Book of Revelation. Bishop Heber originally wrote his hymn to celebrate Trinity Sunday while he was a parish priest in southern England. In 1823, after many years of wanting to be a missionary, Heber was appointed as Bishop of Calcutta. On Sunday, April 3, 1826, after preaching a sermon to citizens of India about the wickedness of the caste system, Bishop Heber died from an apparent stroke, just a few weeks before what would have been his 43rd birthday.

“Holy, Holy, Holy!” is a song that’s found in hymnals regardless of denomination. This morning, I’d like to turn to 2 Kings 4:8-37, and think about how a couple of our other hymns tie into that Scripture this morning. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn there with me. **Read 2 Kings 4:8-37.**

There’s a lot to unpack in the story of Elisha raising the Shunammite woman’s son from the dead. We say Elisha did it, but we know who really did it. God did that for the woman, Elisha was just a willing servant of the Lord in the right place at the right time. Our text opens this morning with some background information to help us understand the big picture. “One day Elisha went to Shunem, and a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat,” (2 Kg. 4:8). See, the lady is practicing what we would call in the United Methodist Church, “radical hospitality.”

Radical Hospitality

In those days in Shunem, if you rolled into town, you couldn’t pull into Cassano’s and get a pizza, or roll through McDonald’s for a Big Mac. You had to rely on the kindness, generosity, and hospitality of strangers. So this lady showed some hospitality – probably much like the hospitality you showed on Tuesday to the Stone family, New Hope – and Elisha knows that whenever he’s around, he can stop by the lady’s house and get a good, hot meal. Look what the lady does next. “She said to her husband, ‘I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let’s make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us,’” (verses 9-10).

And that’s exactly what they did. Just to be clear, they’re not just giving him a meal now, they’re giving him a room in their house to stay in. That’s real “radical hospitality”! A conversation then ensues between Elisha, Elisha’s servant, Gehazi – who was being trained by Elisha, just as Elisha had been trained by Elijah – and the Shunammite woman.

The outcome of this conversation is the promise, by Elisha, that “about this time next year, you will hold a son in your arms,” to which the woman responds, “No my lord! Please, man of God, don’t mislead your servant!” (verse 16). It reminds us of

other women in the Bible who have been promised a child by God. Some of them who come to mind include Abraham's wife, Sarah, who was 100 years old when she had Isaac; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; and thinking along New Testament lines, there's Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary and mother of John the Baptist. We read next, "but the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her," (verse 17).

Put the Pedal to the Metal

God is faithful to keep His promises to us! But there was a problem, wasn't there? There's always a problem when people are involved. "The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. He said to his father, 'My head! My head!' His father told a servant, 'Carry him to his mother.' After the servant lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died," (verses 18-20). Here it is, the Shunammite woman's long-awaited son – a gift from God through Elisha's prophecy – suddenly falls ill and dies.

Notice what she does, though. "She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out," (verse 21). People in those days were more accustomed to death than we are today. It was part of the daily routine. Family and friends died, oftentimes from illnesses that we don't experience today because we have good hygiene – we wash our hands after using the restroom – and because we have clean drinking water. They didn't know parasitic microbes floated around in water in those days. Everyone just drank out of the creek, and picked up all sorts of sicknesses.

We see a conversation play out between the woman and her husband. She doesn't even tell her husband that their son is dead – did you catch that? She just wants to "go to the man of God quickly and return," (verse 22). Then, when she's on the way, she tells the servant, "Don't slow down for me unless I tell you," (verse 24). Today we might say something to the effect of "put the pedal to the metal!" It seems like such a weird reaction to us, today – except that this woman is exhibiting unwavering faith in the promise God's given to her through Elisha the prophet.

Everything's Alright

The Shunammite woman comes to Mount Carmel, where Elisha's at. Now, distance wise, that's about twenty miles through the mountains near the Sea of Galilee down almost to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It's a 52 minute drive by car today; or a ten hour walk if you're huffing it on foot. She's riding a donkey, so we're talking about a few hours to get there. Elisha sends Gehazi with a bunch of questions for the woman when he sees her approaching. "Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?" We see what she tells Gehazi – "Everything is all right." Everything's alright. We say that a lot. Except, in the Shunammite woman's case, it's not. Things had gone very, very wrong for her and her family. I suspect we often react in a very similar way. Say "everything's alright," even when it isn't, simply because we don't want to take the time to really tell what's eating at us, or we think that the person asking is doing the asking for social pleasantries.

“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,’” (verse 27). Gehazi doesn’t know what’s wrong, Elisha doesn’t even know what’s wrong. A lot of times people come to us with grief and struggles, and we don’t know what’s wrong – we may even try to push them away like Gehazi did. If we give people the time they need, make ourselves active listeners who are slow to speak and quick to listen – we may be able to figure out what’s got them worked up.

Everything’s alright – Except It’s Not!

A lot of people don’t want to “waste time” like that, though, or they view it as someone else’s issue or problem. Every person who answers the call to follow Jesus Christ is called to love neighbor – and that means listening to them. “‘Did I ask for a son, my lord?’ she said. ‘Didn’t I tell you, “Don’t raise my hopes?”’” (verse 28). Now we get to the root of the woman’s problem. Without spelling it out for Elisha, she’s told him what her problem is. There’s a huge problem with the son that Elisha had promised God would give to her.

Elisha recognizes it, and tells Gehazi, “Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. Don’t greet anyone you meet, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy’s face,” (verse 29). The woman doesn’t want a Band-Aid or a quick fix. She wants Elisha himself to come take care of business. “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live,” she says, “I will not leave you,” (verse 30). And so, Elisha went with her.

We hear fairly quickly how the story plays out. Gehazi goes ahead of them, lays the staff on the boy’s face, but nothing happens. He meets Elisha and the boy’s mother, and tells them nothing has happened. By the time Elisha and the boy’s mother get to the house, the boy has been dead for several hours. So, Elisha goes into the room where the boy’s dead body is laying, shuts the door, and prays.

God Raises the Dead

There are a lot of people who read the next few verses of the passage, and try to make it sound as though Elisha performed CPR. The Scripture says, “He got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy’s body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes,” (verses 34-35). Friends, that’s not how you do CPR. What do you suppose Elisha was doing when he “turned away and walked back and forth in the room?”

You know what I think he did when he was pacing back and forth? I think Elisha was praying then. He was talking with God about the situation. And God hears and answers every prayer. See, what’s recorded here is a miracle. God used Elisha to perform a miracle – of raising a dead boy to life. God does great things. He even raises the dead!

The story ends with the prophet telling Gehazi to have the woman come up to the room to get her son. She comes in, falls at Elisha’s feet, and takes her son back

downstairs to the rest of his family. This story, and the Shunammite woman in particular, is a great reminder of the strength we have through faith in times of crisis. Born in 1851, to a slave man and a freed woman, Charles Tindley, often referred to as “the Prince of Preachers,” knew what it was like to experience crises in life, but to just get by with saying, like the Shunammite woman, “Everything’s alright.”

It Is Well with My Soul (When I) Take My Burden to the Lord and Leave It There

Shortly after the Civil War, he moved to Philadelphia, and found work as a brick carrier. He later became a volunteer trustee of a Methodist Episcopal Church, which was a predecessor denomination of the United Methodist Church. Tindley never attended school, but taught himself to read and write, and eventually became an ordained elder and pastor. He fought racism nearly his entire life, and wrote – or influenced – several songs including: *We Shall Overcome*, *Stand By Me*, and in 1916, the one you sang earlier, *Leave It There*. “Just take your burden to the Lord and leave it there,” it says. It’s a great song of encouragement, especially as we entered our time of prayer together. In the end, everything’s going to turn out alright. That’s Tindley’s overarching message.

In a similar vein is the story of *It Is Well with My Soul*, by Horatio Spafford. He was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago. But in 1871, his only son died of pneumonia, and shortly thereafter, the Great Chicago Fire ruined him financially. Two years later, Spafford’s four daughters died when the ship they were on sank off the coast of Newfoundland after colliding with another vessel. His wife, also on the ship, reached Wales ten days later, and wired Spafford the message, “Saved alone.” Despite these horrific losses, Spafford’s faith remained unshaken. He wrote *It Is Well with My Soul* as a testimony to God’s sovereignty and goodness.

“Everything is all right,” the Shunammite woman said. But it wasn’t, at least from our view. “It is well with my soul,” Spafford writes, but from our view, dealing with those sorts of losses, it’s not. Both of them, and the other hymn writers, express a profound trust in God in the midst of trials. They proclaim hope even in the darkest of times, because they trust in God’s plan. When experience times of darkness in our lives, let’s be inspired by the Shunammite woman’s faith, and the powerful messages given to us by the hymn writers. God always takes great care of us. After all, He’s already given us His only Son, Jesus Christ – His very best, to prove His great love for us!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for the lessons from Your word and the hymns that inspire our faith. Help us to live out these truths in our daily lives, trusting in Your power and grace. May we always seek to see You more clearly, leave our burdens with You, and join in the eternal worship of Your holy name. Amen.