

Pentecost II - Lewis Baptism

Rev'd Anne C. Fowler

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Oh Lord, my God, let this child's life come into him again. I Kings, 17:22

A man who had died ... was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. (Jesus) said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise.' Luke 7:13 ff

In a few moments we will welcome Mariana Dulce Lewis into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism, and as always, what a glorious moment that will be. These are among our peak moments in our liturgical and community life here at St. John's. I know I always say this, and it's always true.

When I say the blessing over the water, one of the prayers of the baptismal rite, I proclaim that, *In (the water of Baptism) we are buried with Christ in death, and by it we share in the resurrection.* This is the mystery at the heart of baptism, the profound and difficult claim that by this sacrament we die and are reborn by the Holy Spirit.

The aspect of baptism that's easy to understand is the social or community part. Today we welcome Mariana into the community of St John's in a formal and sacramental way. And – a bit more challenging to understand, but still graspable: we welcome her into the larger Body of Christ, the communion of the saints, the fellowship of those at all times and in all places who have followed Jesus. Mariana becomes one of us, both locally and globally. This joining is a choice that her mother Liz and her godparents make for her now. And, we hope and pray, a choice she will make for herself later, when she is older, a choice that she will make again and again, both formally, in confirmation, and informally, by her participation in the life of whatever Christian community she may find herself a part.

All of this is comprehensible enough. But then, what does it mean to be *buried with Christ in death, and to share in the resurrection?* I don't pretend to have a definitive answer to that. But I think our readings for this morning give us some clues, some pointers. The passage from Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel from Luke tell parallel stories of children who have died. In each case the mother appeals to the religious authority at hand: the mistress of the house of Zar'ephath cries out to Elijah, and the widow of Na'in importunes Jesus. And in both cases the children are brought back to life.

Now Biblical apologists and literalists might go to great lengths to explain *what really happens* here: the boys aren't really dead, but in comas, or whatever. That is not my interest. To me the stories have other meanings and other purposes. The stories attest

to the power and authority of the religious leaders involved, Elijah and Jesus. These men can and do accomplish great things. Moreover, they are healers. The mighty acts they perform do not involve defeating armies or parting the seas. They are healers, they bring life and health where there has been illness and brokenness. And they do so in the most modest of circumstances. They bring relief and hope not to kings and potentates but to ordinary people, and they do so not for their own glory but in the name of God.

The stories attest as well, and critically, to the power of faith. The mothers of these children will not give up their struggle for their children's lives. They believe that healing is possible; they have faith in the power of Elijah and Jesus, faith in them as instruments of the power of God; they act on that faith and their faith is vindicated.

So these stories tell us that, through faith, there is life after death. They make their points through narrative, through story, because stories are vivid and easy to understand. They make life after death seem literal and tangible. But the larger point, the spiritual point, is that physical death, for those who believe, is not the end. And what that means, further, is that physical life is not the end; that is, physical life is not the be-all and the end-all.

And it is that other life, the life of the Spirit, into which we are reborn through baptism. It is that other life into which we welcome Mariana this morning.

The stories we hear this morning have other themes as well: themes of choice, themes of risk. The mothers of these young dying children could have given up. Infant and child mortality has been a commonplace in human history, and, alas, still is in much of the world. The loss of a child was nothing unusual in Jesus' time. Why do these mothers believe they can win for their children exemption from the rule of disease and death?

Their fierce love compels them to act, of course. Their deep attachment to and hope for their children moves them to *choose* to fight for their lives, to take heroic and bold measures to secure help for their children. This is risky. Not only was their behavior – approaching strange men in public– inappropriate and unseemly for women of their day. But such choices, such casting of one's fate upon the goodwill of others, such trusting in the power of a loving God to show compassion and to effect healing– this is perilous business. These women wager with their whole hearts.

And of course their risks are rewarded. Their children are reborn – whatever that may mean literally, it means that these children, and their mothers with them, enter into new life, a life where death is not the end.

And that is the new life into which we welcome Mariana through the waters of baptism.

A great teacher of the New Testament and of preaching, Bishop Krister Stendahl, tells would be preachers: *just tell the story*. The Scripture story, that is.

And so what I want to say about Mariana, and about her mother Liz, is that the Bible stories from this morning tell their story. The story of Liz's great faith in God and deep desire for a child. The story of her choice to find and claim her child— the child that God, I have no doubt, put on earth for her to find and claim – her choice to do this on her own, without a partner. (Note, please, that there's no mention of fathers in the bible stories. The widow of Na'in is a widow, of course, but there's no dad in the story from Kings, either. This does not mean that there aren't men waiting in the wings somewhere; but fathers or stepfathers are not principals in these stories. It is the mothers' faith, the mothers' choices, the mothers' risks, which work to bring about the miracles.)

The stories speak of fierce love and attachment. Of choice, and risk, of boldness, and faith. They tell us that these qualities and acts are answered by the compassion of God and result in new life and great rejoicing.

And that's the story, isn't it, my dear friends, the story we celebrate this morning with Liz and Mariana? The story of Liz's wager with her whole heart. And Mariana, God's gift. Alleluia!

Amen.