

**“The Lies of Fear”**  
**I Kings 17:8-24, Luke 7:11-17**  
**June 5, 2016**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

**The church, more than anyone else, is called to tell the story of hope rather than fear.**

Many of you know from our conversations or from the stuff that goes up on Facebook that Erin and I have been working a lot on our front gardens this year. Now I have to admit that so much time is spent there this year because Erin has been gone for three springs in a row when she was in Louisville and so now she is making up for three years of my neglect. So we try to go out there early on weekend mornings so we can get some work done in the garden before it gets too hot. And the morning sun is very nice as it begins to warm up the yard. But it turns out that I'm not the only one who thinks so. A couple of weeks ago I walked out the front door and who do you think I saw sunning himself on our front step? Right, a snake. Now this was just a little garter snake. Actually, he's not all that little, about 16" long. But I know enough not to be afraid of garter snakes, I've known that since I was a kid. But when I first stepped out of the house and saw him just a few feet in front of me, what do you think I felt? Right again, fear. You know how your heart jumps into your throat and you get that quick jolt of adrenaline? For a quick second, you're afraid. And you're supposed to be—human beings are supposed to be afraid of snakes. We're hard wired that way, I think. And there's other things we're afraid of too, aren't there?

This is not going to be a sermon about politics, at least not intentionally so. But I can't help but notice all the political rhetoric that abounds on the news these days. And much of it is telling us that we are supposed to be afraid. You know you shouldn't vote for Donald Trump because he's someone to be afraid of. You know if we elect Hillary Clinton lots of terrible things will happen so you'd better be afraid of her and the Democrats. Whoever is telling you to be afraid, maybe they are the ones to watch out for. Because fear is easy. It's an emotional state. It's one of the most basic of human emotions. Deep down in that reptilian part of our brains, we are wired to be afraid, we are see or hear something that alarms that part of our brain and we quickly become ready to run or to fight. Fear is easy. It's easy

to make people afraid. It draws on one of the most primitive emotions. But we're not reptiles anymore. We're not supposed to make all our decisions based on fear.

In our scripture lessons there are people that are afraid, and rightly so. First, I hope you noticed how similar the stories are in Kings and in Luke. Just like Elijah, Jesus raised from the dead the only son of a widowed woman. To the people of Elijah's time and to the people that Jesus knew, this was an important sign of the compassion of God. Because the widows are afraid. "Widows held a tenuous position in Jesus' day. They were often linked with orphans as those without provision in Jewish society. Women lived under the protection of their father's household, and then of their husband's household. After the death of a husband, it was customary for the brother or other relative of the deceased to marry the widow. In cases where no male relative from the family of her husband was available, the widow moved to the margins of society and fell vulnerable to alienation and exclusion from the community and the simple daily provision of familial care. Further, the death of an only son would leave a widow without an heir and therefore unable to retain whatever means remained for her. Without an heir, all personal property reverted to the husband's family after his death."<sup>1</sup> These widows should be afraid. When their sons died, they had nothing, their lives were over. There was no one left to take care of them.

That Jesus has compassion on the widows should teach us something. It should at least teach us that God has compassion for those on the fringes of society, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the one who has nothing, no safety net. As we follow Christ and his ministry becomes our ministry, that becomes our concern also. From the earliest days, the Christian church has been concerned about widows and orphans, those who were not provided for in the culture of that time. As we head into another political season, you will not hear from me about for whom you should vote. But I will often encourage you to consider not just your own well being, but I will ask if we, and the candidates we support, have compassion for those on the fringes of our society.

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1 Copeland, Verlee. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, volume 3, p. 119.

Because these passages are also teaching us that fear should not be our motivation. There is fear in these passages, certainly. And we are often told in scripture that the fear of the Lord is a good thing. But there are different kinds of fear in the Bible. One kind is the fear that provokes awe and silence and chills run up our spine and makes us want to drop to our knees. That's when we experience the holiness and greatness of God. That's not the kind of fear that is mentioned in this passage. We are told that when the young man was raised in the village of Nain that "fear seized" the people. This is the fear that makes us want to run away. It's not awe, it's being scared that something bad is going to happen to you. Phobia is the Greek word. Scared. That's the fear that we're supposed to overcome, not act out of. Because fear lies. Fear tells us to run away when we shouldn't. Did I need to run away from that snake. No. Do we need to run away from each other? No. Jesus teaches that we should have compassion. Because the lies of fear can be overcome.

We said before that fear is easy. It was easy for the widows to be afraid. It was easy for the people to be afraid. Wouldn't you be if you saw someone rise from the dead? That sounds scary to me. But that's what our faith is based on—that Jesus rose from the dead and that we can face the passing of a loved one or even our own deaths not with fear but with hope. Now hope is harder than fear—it's not a reptilian response emotion. It's not so much an emotion as it is a way of looking at the world. But that's where our faith is, in hope not in fear. Too often our leaders, and I'm especially including religious leaders, have relied on fear not on hope. We should follow Christ, we should give to the church, we should obey what the preacher says, because if we don't there's hellfire and brimstone waiting. We're going down the tubes, we're facing catastrophe, we're going to lose what we have, if you all don't get together and give more money and follow what I say. Be afraid of what's coming. But Jesus comes with compassion to the widow and brings hope to their lives. And that's our role too. "We can't forget that we are "easter people. We live our our faith with the knowledge of the Resurrection. We know that new life is possible. . . A good leader deals in hope. . . successful politicians too often deal in fear. That's no wonder. Hope sometimes takes years to cultivate; fear takes

only seconds. Fear is so destructive, so deceitful, that sometimes it even wears the clothes of hope. It wears a disguise that tricks you into thinking that it actually is hope.”<sup>2</sup>

It is too easy to use fear, but real change comes through hope and that is what Jesus gives to the widows and that is what we are called to give to the world. There is no better way for the church to declare real hope than to proclaim that resurrection really is real. And there is no more powerful way to resist the destructive forces of our world than to boldly tell these stories, the story of Jesus, our story, the stories of compassion. The church, more than anyone else in our world is called to bring the story of hope rather than fear. Because we, more than anyone else, know that resurrection happens. Maybe that's scary at first glance. But we should not be afraid, but full of hope. That's the story we need to hear. That's the story the world needs to hear. Resurrection happens.

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2 Heath, Emily. *Resurrection Phobia*. Day One. June 5, 2016