

## 13<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time, Homily

2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16; Psalm 89:2-3, 16-17, 18-19; Romans 6:3-4, 8-11; Matthew 10:37-42

**“Rather than a religion focused only on getting to Heaven, Christianity should be viewed as a school of discipleship in which we learn how to help and accompany others on the journey. Fr. Scott Lewis.**

Our Old Testament reading from 2 Kings Chapter 4 tells an obscure, but powerful story. It is about an unnamed woman who shows kindness and hospitality to the prophet Elisha, the successor of Elijah. Through her example and by her witness we discover a woman of deep faith, a companion for our journeys. This Shunammite woman has much to teach us about hospitality, contentment, and courage.

### **Hospitality:**

The witness of this woman’s hospitality is profound. Not only does she provide a meal for the prophet (And his servant) each time he traveled through her town, she extends her kindness and generosity by building him an apartment with all the necessary furnishings! 2 Kings 4:8-10 states,

“One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

Wow, that is hospitality! Thanks be to God for loving women and men who go out of their way to offer support, encouragement, prayer, food and lodging so others might hear the message of God and might experience the message themselves.

COVID-19 has hindered many in their efforts to offer hospitality. Nevertheless, the gospel compels us to keep seeking ways to show God’s love and offer support to others who are in need.

Hebrews 13:2 states, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

### **Contentment:**

There is more to this story than hospitality. There is also profound contentment in the midst of promise and pain, blessing and sorrow. It is clear that the generosity of the Shunammite woman was pure. She had no ulterior motives. She sought no gain or reward by her actions. Nevertheless, Elisha, the prophet, wanted to express his gratitude and offers to use his influence on her benefit. She simply replies, “I live among my own people.” In essence she is saying in the words of Mary Oliver, **“Sometimes I need only to stand wherever I am to be blessed.”**

This woman was content. She carried burdens, yet she was able to stand where she was and know she was blessed. I am inspired by such faith and peace. To stand where we are, even in the midst of a pandemic and racial unrest, and find contentment is a grace.

While touched by the woman's hospitality and moved by her contentment, Elisha continued to seek a way to bless the woman – and bless her he does with a promise of a child. We are told, "Elisha promised, "This time next year you will be holding a baby son." This promise had a heightened significance given that the woman was barren and her husband old.

While our reading ends there in 2 Kings 4:16, there is so much more to the story.

The Biblical account records these astounding events:

"The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, "Oh, my head, my head!" The father said to his servant, "Carry him to his mother." He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and **he died**. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband, and said, "Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again." He said, "Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath." She said, "It will be all right." Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you." So she set out, and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, "Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her, and say to her, Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?" She answered, "**It is all right.**" When she came to the man of God at the mountain, she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away. But the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not mislead me?" He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer; and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left" (2 Kings 4:17 – 37).

If you are like me, I needed to read the above passage several times. Besides the immense sadness of a child's sudden death, what struck me was the woman's contentment in the midst of her sorrow. The prophet specifically asks how her husband, her and their child were doing and she replied, "It is all right". What! How can it be all right? Her son was dead, her sorrow was real. Yet, this unnamed woman, who is an example for us all, knew a contentment beyond attachments, even that of her only beloved son. She loved God, the Giver, even more than the gift - even when the gift was her precious, promised, only son.

I am reminded of the Hymn, "It is well with my soul."

"It is Well With My Soul" was written by Horatio G. Spafford (1828-1888). The story behind the hymn is overwhelming. One account reads, "Spafford was a young businessman from Chicago. Despite his reputation and wealth, he couldn't prevent the back-to-back losses of his son to tragedy and his entire real estate business soon after to the great Chicago Fire of 1871. As you can imagine, this kind of earthly trial was exhausting, not just for Spafford, but for his whole family. So, to help lift their spirits as well as his own, Spafford planned a European trip for himself, his wife and his four daughters. Everything was set, but due to some unexpected last-minute business, he stayed in Chicago and sent his family on ahead. He was to follow them in a few days, and he would meet them on the mainland.

Not long into their voyage, the family's ship was struck by another vessel. It sank in twelve minutes. The survivors were rescued and brought to the European shore, which is where Mrs. Spafford sent a message to her husband. It read "Saved alone." Spafford left immediately to join his wife and penned this hymn over the area where the ship carrying his daughters had sunk. He wrote:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul."*

Spafford, like the Shunammite woman, loved and trusted God, the Giver, more than the gifts, even when the gifts included his beloved son and four precious daughters. Just imagining the grief is overwhelming. Spafford's Hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul" and the Shunammite's words, "It is all right" speak of a contentment and peace this world can not offer.

I am also reminded of the words of Julian of Norwich, "'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

With such contentment, faith and trust, "we need only stand where we are to be blessed."

The witness of the Shunammite woman, Spafford, and Julian of Norwich give perspective to Jesus' startling words in our Gospel, "Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me and who ever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"

Deep and lasting contentment and peace is found by loving God, the Giver, more than any gift, no matter how precious and eternal the gifts are.

### **Courage:**

Standing in a place of peace and blessing, the Shunammite woman offered generous hospitality and lived in profound contentment. However, she also demonstrates tremendous courage. After laying her dead son on a bed, she would go to the prophet, Elisha, the Holy Man of God, and plead for help – for life.

Her courage gave birth to life. The Bible records the remarkable miracle of her son being raised from the dead.

I want to be like the Shunammite woman. I want to live a life of generous hospitality, peaceful contentment, and hope-filled courage. A courage to seek life even in the midst of death. A courage to seek a deeper presence of God in and through the sorrows of life. A courage that sees through dead ends, to new life and beginnings.

This is what our faith and baptisms reveal. As Paul says in our second reading, “We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” Yes, the courage to live and walk in newness of life even in the midst of so many uncertainties is what I desire.

Our faith is ultimately about life. Fr. Jude Siciliano, OP writes, “In the end, our faith is finally about new life. It is a new life that we can even experience here, for example, as we discover the deeper presence of God below the surface of suffering and in the presence of the poor. Where we, or society, have drawn a dead end, God breaks through the road block offering life and a new beginning. On the cross and in his death, Christ slipped out of our hands and away from our usual norms for success, into the waiting arms of God. In our baptism we do the same; we die to the many other options the world offers and, instead, come alive in the arms of God.”

As we “come alive in the arms of God,” may we, like the Shunammite woman, live lives of hospitality, contentment and courage.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve