1 Kings 17:8-24 and Luke 7:11-17

“Hope for the Hopeless.”

A missionary was sitting at her second-story window when she was handed a letter from home. As she opened the letter, a crisp, new, ten-dollar bill fell out. She was pleasantly surprised, but as she read the letter her eyes were distracted by the movement of a shabbily dressed stranger down below, leaning against a lamp post in front of her building. She just couldn’t get him off her mind.

Thinking that he might be in greater financial stress than she, she slipped the bill into another envelop on which she quickly penned “Don’t despair.” Then she threw it out the window. The stranger below picked it up, read it, looked up, and smiled as he tipped his hat and went his way. The next day she was about to leave the house when a knock came at the door. She found the same shabbily dressed man smiling as he handed her a roll of bills. When she asked what they were for, he replied: “That’s the sixty bucks you won lady. *Don’t Despair* paid five to one.” (Tales of the Tardy Oxcart, Pg. 274)

The word *hope* is a funny one in English. Over the years it has taken on two uses in common language. As a present participle, *Hope* has come to mean something more akin to wishful thinking. As an example we might say, “We hope it doesn’t rain today and ruin the BBQ, or I hope I catch a fish today.” That last one I am well acquainted with. As a usage, the present participle is weak word.

I would go so far as to say it is a flimsy word, and brings us no assurance at all. However, the other usage is far more important. *Hope*, as a noun, is the usage most prevalent in the scriptures. As a noun, *Hope* means “A confident expectation that a desire will be fulfilled”. Without this kind of hope, despair settles into our hearts. When there is no hope (vision), the bible says people perish. (Prov. 29:13) We know what this need for hope is like. We actually hunger for this kind of hope.

When we attend the physician’s office, and receive a devastating diagnosis, the first thing we long to know is, is there any hope? Parents are grappling with a teenage offspring who gets into serious trouble over and over again, and they wonder, “Is there any hope”. Despair, the opposite of hope is an awful thing. It darkens the soul. In the midst of despair, we wonder, why bother? Why struggle on? What’s the point of this fruitless exercise?

Most of us forget that there is a whole genre of music, and writing, that expresses this kind of despair. It is called a *Lament*; that is, words and music that convey the deep emotional pain of despair. Did you know that Country music is rife with it? There is an old joke that goes, what do you get when you play Country Music backwards? You get your wife back, your truck back, and your dog back.

The bible too, has many examples of lamentations, even including a book called Lamentations. Lamentations, the book, is attributed to Jeremiah the prophet, and is reflective of his own experience of working and preaching to the people of Judah.

Here is just a little taste of what he writes, “The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing love of the Lord never ends! By his mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each day. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!’” (Lam. 3:19-23)

The lament is a critical need in our lives, and the church has done a great disservice by not honouring the needs of people to express their despair, and call on God for hope. Too often we have easily dismissed the crushing grief and pain of others. We may have even questioned the faith of people who seem overwhelmed by despair. “Cheer up,” we say. “God is with you” we promise, but as true as that is we still feel defeated.

Both our scripture lessons today are stories about how God intervened into the most hopeless of situations. Both stories are meant to encourage us. Both stories have a very similar setup, and Luke wants us to catch the similarity. In both stories, widows are faced with the death of their only child; their only son.

At first we might think, “Yes this is tragic, but people die all the time, why are these two stories remembered?” They are recorded because of the sheer hopelessness of the situation. In a time when there were no social programs, or public pension plans, and women were not really permitted to earn income, women were dependent on their husbands, for their economic welfare.

Now when a man died, it was expected that his children, primarily his sons, would care for his surviving spouse. This is the source behind that very touching moment when Jesus was on the cross and he placed his mother Mary in the care of John. As the eldest son it was his responsibility, as we assume by this point Joseph was already dead. The two women in our scripture lessons had already lost their husbands, and now they have lost their only sons. The moment these sons died, their mothers were in real trouble.

Who was going to put food on the table? Who was going to keep a roof over her head? Focusing on the events in Luke 7, we read that as Jesus’ entourage approached the town of Nain, they were met by the funeral procession coming out of the village. Luke notes for us that there were many mourners. I believe he notes this to make sure we realize how desperate a situation this widow is now in.

The large numbers of mourners, reveals that the whole community was saddened by this woman’s bad situation. I think a modern equivalent is when people are touched by a tragic death of someone, and will create makeshift memorials. Complete strangers to the deceased, will drive many miles to simply leave flowers, or stuffed animals at the sight of the tragedy, or in the case of Tom Bosma, the man from Hamilton killed over wanting to sell his truck, people left flowers at his church.

I remember at the time seeing a woman interviewed on TV dropping flowers off at the Bosma’s church, being asked about her desire to come she said, “I don’t know the family.

But I am heartbroken about what happened. I wanted to do something, but I felt so helpless, but I wanted the family to know someone cared.” As human beings we understand this woman’s feelings. We too have faced circumstances where we feel utterly helpless, but also longing to do something to express concern and care.

And so people send cards, flowers, casseroles, attend memorial services and donate money to either the family hurt by the tragedy, or a charity that has meaning to the family. The wasteland of despair is an awful place to be. We can really feel for the two widowed women in our scripture lessons today. Losing a child is really awful, but losing any hope of anything good for the future along with it, just compounds the problem.

It is ironic that as the funeral procession is coming out of Nain, it is met by a procession coming in. Jesus is not alone when he comes to Nain. His disciples are with him and Luke tells us a great crowd was with him. The contrast of emotional states between the two processions is quite stark. The funeral procession is full of despair and grief, while the procession with Jesus is buzzing with excitement.

There was anticipation over everything Jesus said and did. The procession behind Jesus was just itching for another miracle. These people had the beginnings of a new hope. They dared in whispered words, to ask if this Jesus was indeed the Messiah, or at least a mighty prophet like Elijah. So, Luke has us see that these two processions run right into each other, and their emotional states clash.

The question is raised; which procession will carry the day? I am sure that when the crowd following Jesus saw the funeral procession they went quiet. Their excited tones were silenced. As word spread about the plight of the widow, their joy would have turned to sorrow. In massed agreement they would have decided to let the funeral procession pass, undisturbed, to go about its sad, hopeless business.

I mean what can anybody do in the face of such tragedy? If it were today, we might take our hats off or pull our cars over to the side of the road to let the procession pass. Nobody, I mean nobody, shouts, or sings, or is excited when the funeral coach rolls by. Perhaps some of those following Jesus would have thought, “Wow! What bad timing”. “Maybe we should consider going on to another village.”

But in every village there is its own story of tragedy and despair. Okay, then, let us just step aide, and let the funeral go by. It is the respectful thing to do; in fact, it is the only thing to do. Let us step aside Jesus, and let them pass, then we can go about our business. Luke writes that Jesus’ heart was overflowing with compassion for this widow. He understands her situation, her despair. Like many in the crowd he was sympathetic, even empathetic, and we would expect nothing less from anyone with half a heart.

What we don’t expect, is what Luke tells us happened. Instead of stepping aside and letting the funeral pass, Jesus meets it head on. Metaphorically, Jesus wades fully into it, going to the geographical center of the tragedy, which is the funeral pallet. Perhaps, the crowd thought, Jesus wanted to express his condolences.

But all he says to the widow is, “Don’t cry!” Don’t cry? How can she not cry? Her whole world has crumbled around her. Those who heard him may have thought his words were shallow and meaningless. All of us have heard awful stories of mindless things people have said at funerals, or at a funeral visitation.

To a young widow someone might say, “Well you’re young enough, you can marry again.” To a grieving family someone might say, “It’s for the best.” Really, how is death ever for the best? Paul calls it the last enemy to be defeated. “Don’t cry?” How do these words help? But as we know, Jesus is always about far more than mere words. He steps over to the coffin, and he touches it.

Now, you might say that this is no big deal. We have all been to funerals where people have touched coffins to express their farewells to the deceased. But in Jewish culture this was a huge faux pas. Dead bodies were considered in Jewish law to be unclean. This is one of the reasons the Jewish men walked by the injured man on the road in the parable of the Good Samaritan. They did not know if the man was alive or dead. By touching the body, or even the coffin of a dead person, you were made unclean.

The bearers of the funeral pallet stop, out of shock, or out of uncertainty as to what Jesus was doing. This is one of those moments we call a “pregnant pause”. Uncertainty, expectation, curiosity: are all at a tipping point. If Jesus offers nothing more than empty words, and breaks cultural taboos, he is nothing more than an irritation. Who is he to interrupt this sad procession?

However, this is not an ordinary interruption. Speaking with authority as the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus speaks his command, “Young man, get up!” And the young man sat up and began to talk with those around him, and the bible says Jesus gave him back to his mother. Those words, “Back to his mother” are powerful. That which was lost is returned. Despair is replaced by hope. God is still with us, as he was with Elijah in that time of great famine.

The one thing, this widow wanted more than life itself, was given back to her. There was a reason to go on, a purpose for her life, hope for tomorrow. The two processions are now merged in their great awe of what they saw, and their jubilation of this miracle. Everything is being reconciled in this story. The woman and her son are a family again, and two very distinct groups are merged into one.

One of the more critical things this passage is telling us is that when Jesus and his followers encounter processions, or demonstrations, or experiences of despair and hopelessness, something happens. And that something should be and must be restoration of hope. Without hope people perish, the scriptures tell us, and in the midst of life’s tragedies, people need more than empty words, and sentimental gestures.

If we truly do not want the world to cry, then we had better give it a reason not to. Because this world is full of heartache, full of reasons to feel broken, and full of reasons to despair.

I mentioned Tim Bosma, but there is the tragedy in Fort McMurray, the war in Syria, hospital wards full of people, all longing for hope. We might be quite content to walk along in Jesus’ little procession taking in all the marvelous miracles, but what are we going to do when we come face to face with processions of despair?

Are we content to simply step aside and let it pass, bowing our heads, and expressing our sympathy? Or dare we, brashly, step into the heartache, and bring hope. Bring the hope of Christ. Bring the hope of the Resurrection and the Life.

Is our hope the noun, or the present participle? Are we confident that the sick will be healed, the blind shall see, the dead shall arise, or are we just wishing it was so? Does Christ being in our midst make a difference or not? I know Jesus makes all the difference. I’ve seen his hand at work, in my own life, and in the lives of many of you. I’ve seen people get off their sick beds, when everyone wondered if they ever would.

I’ve seen relationships so fractured, that a permanent separation seemed the only logical conclusion, become by Christ’s grace restored. Because people prayed, I’ve seen God open possibilities for a future. Because of our hope, I’ve seen tears of grief changed to faith for an eternal future. I been present when people have said, “We have seen the hand of God at work today.”

I have seen it; how about you?