

Three stories about life and death. In the first, the prophet Elijah revives a boy who has died. In the second, Paul describes how he had an encounter with the Risen Christ that was so persuasive that he not only stopped killing people for being unfaithful Jews, but he started spreading the Gospel of life to both Jews and Gentiles. In the third, Jesus brings another widow's only son back to life.

We could try to be satisfied to just think of these as simply three miracle stories and distract ourselves with happy talk about God, couldn't we? That might feel easier. Maybe. But "easier" does not honor the grief that people carry in these stories. "Easier" does not honor the grief that people in this congregation carry. Grief that people have in their hearts for parents. For spouses. And, yes, grief carried for children, the grief that may be the hardest burden on this side of heaven for any heart to bear.

There is no lasting comfort in a faith that offers short-cuts to deep, genuine suffering. To find God in deep suffering requires not magic but a profound miracle. All three of these stories are about the transfiguring miracle of God's grace.

In Luke's story, Jesus and his friends have walked from Capernaum to the Arabic village of Nain about two miles from Mount Tabor, the site of the Jesus' own transfiguration. When they get to the outskirts of Nain, the parade of life following Jesus meets a parade of death following a widow. Jesus sees the widow, who moves his heart and he says to her, "Do not mourn."

Jesus is allowed to say this to a grieving mother; we are not. When we say things to people in mourning like "Don't cry" or "He's in a better place" or "God called her home," we are usually trying to make ourselves feel better. Jesus can say "Do not mourn" to this particular widowed mother because he is about to give her life.

When he comes forward and touches the bier bearing the body of her son, all those carrying the stretcher stand still. And that, *that*, is the most appropriate response to the arising of grace. Silence and stillness. Simply being as present as we can be to the moment, without grasping or rejecting.

This is the pivotal moment, the transfiguring hinge, where the entire Gospel shifts and we drop a level deeper into God's truth.

You see, if we are too quick to grasp at an explanation that fits our current perspective, we might assume that this Gospel is about God answering the prayers of the devout. And God does answer prayers. God answered the prayers of Elijah in the story from First Kings. But that is almost useless and maybe even a little cruel to point out to any parent who is grieving the death of a child. Or the death of a spouse. Natural questions arise: "Why wasn't my son brought back to life?" "Why did my wife have to die so young?" "Did I do something wrong?" Do you see?

If we are too quick to reject the moment as a one-time peculiarity or some ancient anomaly or naïve mythology, we might assume that God no longer works in ways that confound rational explanation. And our learning does reveal astonishing insights into creation. Quantum physics is capable of describing excessively strange interactions at scales so tiny they defy the imagination. But even the most cutting edge science stands flat-footed at the mystery of how anything came into existence at all.

I'm not saying that any of these perspectives are wrong. I am saying that our perspectives can be rather limiting if we don't allow God to widen and deepen them. Let me show you what I mean.

There is a statue in Writer's Square in downtown Denver, Colorado. It's an impressive bronze called "Self-made Man" and it must be at least 10 feet tall. The sculptor, Bobbie Carlyle, created a muscular figure with a huge hammer and chisel carving himself out of the block of metal that still holds him from the waist down. In her artist's statement, Carlyle says that the sculpture is a man "carving himself and his future from the raw stone from which he emerges."

"Self-made Man" is one of her most successful pieces in part because it captures a particularly American ideal—that of the independent spirit toiling to create oneself out of nothing, relying only and completely on one's own strength of character and perseverance. For many people, it is an inspiring vision and I sincerely admire people who work hard to better themselves. It's just that I find the vision to be near-sighted.

Carlyle worked on this statue for years using six different male models, including one of her sons who provided the face, while assorted body parts were "borrowed" from other men in her life. She left deliberate nicks and abrasions in the finished work because she thinks people need to see signs of their own effort and toil.

After a divorce, she took to sculpting full-time. Carlyle's seven children supported her efforts, in part, by learning to help out around the house so she could concentrate on her work. Her success has inspired her to start another statue called "Self-made Woman" that will depict "a woman creating herself from pliable yet strong clay, making her life and future to the smallest detail."

Now, recognizing that other people's blind-spots are always easier to notice than my own, I wonder about these statues and the artist creating them. Where did the "self-made man" get the hammer and chisel, and who cut his arms out of the stone? Where did the "self-made woman" get the gown she is wearing and who made the clay that she is emerging from? But what I find most ironic is that the artist doesn't convey in her art the network of support – the community – that surrounds her.

Think about this: In the story about Elijah, what did the widow do *for herself* to regain life? What did Paul do *on his own* that changed him from an over-enthusiastic killer into an architect of the Christian faith? What did the widow of Nain do *entirely by herself* that prompted Jesus to bring life out of death?

God was present to each of these people in unanticipated situations and changed their lives in extraordinary ways. The first widow complains to Elijah, the prophet who has become her strange houseguest under circumstances that have led to bizarre events. She blames Elijah for the death of her son, and yet Elijah prays for her. God responds by bringing life out of death.

Paul, a Jewish citizen of Rome, has been feeding his self-righteous wrath by killing followers of Christ. An uninvited revelation of the Risen Christ comes to Paul at the peak of his intolerance that blows him outside himself and into a larger world. Through Paul's flawed humanity, the living God spills over all human boundaries to welcome Jews and Gentiles like the Galatians into life transfigured as God's children.

The Gospel story is counter-intuitive and different than other healing stories. It has nothing to do with God answering prayer. It has nothing to do with anyone being faithful enough. Not this time.

Jesus sees a widow in mourning and has compassion for her and speaks to her—not to the son, but to *her*. Just like the widow in the first story, this is truly a woman in danger of destitution. Without a family, especially without a son, life expectancy for both women would be extremely short. A son, in the ancient eastern Mediterranean, was a mother's protection and provider. While our attention is perhaps drawn to the dead son, Jesus attends to the woman, his mother, speaking first to her: "Do not mourn."

She is silent.

The stretcher-bearers are still.

Jesus crosses a social boundary to touch the stretcher and only then speaks to the son, saying "Young man, I say to you, be raised." Then Jesus, like Elijah, gives the son to his mother. Giving their sons back to the widows raises the women from social desolation and early death back to life. The sons are resuscitated, the women are restored to the life of the community, and the community is reinvigorated. And the glory of God spreads – life-giving grace upon life-giving grace.

In all three stories, God is present in unexpected ways, but always acting true to God's nature, which is to pour out love and life for God's people. Standing as still, silent observers with open minds and open hearts, even hearts broken open by grief, we give the living God an opening and our consent to deepen our understanding, to transfigure us and our communities. In stillness and silence, beholding the mysteries of grace, we see God at work in our own stories.