

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Our Greatest Needs*
Service Theme: *Life for the Dead*

Sermon Theme: *Life for the Dead* (March 26, 2023)
2 Kings 4:17-37

In 9 years of ministry, I've conducted 19 funerals. In nearly 35 years of life, I've attended countless others. I've sat at people's bedsides as they breathed their final breaths. I've sat in the kitchen, comforting a woman with her husband's lifeless body covered by a sheet in the next room. I've spent quite a bit of time around death in my life.

But never, not even once, has the dead body in the casket suddenly sat up and greeted the gathered mourners. Never have the ashes in the urn rejoined into a living body once again. Never have the lungs long void of breath began breathing again. Never. Not one single time. And I'll be very shocked if your experience is any different than mine. Because except in dystopian, apocalyptic fiction, the dead don't live again.

Which then begs the question, "Why them?" In our Scripture readings, we heard two separate accounts of dead people brought back to life: The Shunammite boy, and Jesus' good friend Lazarus. Why them? Out of all the people in the world who have taken a final breath, why did God fill their lungs with breath again? Out of all the hearts that have stopped beating, why did God start theirs again? Why them?

I doubt any of us have some personal vendetta against this Shunammite boy, or Mary and Martha's brother. Which means when we ask, "Why them?" the real question on our hearts is, "Why not them?" Why not my spouse? Why not my grandpa? Why not my mom? Why not my child? If God is able to raise those people from the dead, why not bring our dead loved ones back to life too?

God raised the Shunammite boy through the prophet Elisha. If you remember, Elisha served for a time as a sort of understudy to the

prophet Elijah. Elijah was one of God's most prominent mouthpieces to his rebellious people and their wicked kings, until God took him up to Heaven in a whirlwind, and literally passed the mantle on to Elisha.

During Elisha's God-guided travels, he came to the town of Shunem, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. While there, he was invited in for a meal by a wealthy woman who so appreciated the work of God's prophet that she convinced her husband to build a room onto their house, so that whenever Elisha passed through Shunem, he could stay with them. This woman was childless, and her husband was old. So out of thankfulness for the Shunammite woman's generosity, God's prophet Elisha promised her, ***"About this time next year, you will hold a son in your arms."***

God could see this woman's heart. He'd certainly heard her prayers for a son, which is why she responded to Elisha's prophecy, ***"No, my lord, don't mislead your servant, man of God!"*** This wasn't doubt or a lack of trust in God's promises, as much as an expression of how deeply she longed for a son. We do that sometimes too, don't we? When it seems like we'll finally receive or achieve something we've been working for or desiring for a long time, to protect our hearts from disappointment, we'll sometimes say something like, "Don't get my hopes up!" But we say it with a joyful smile and a heart fluttering with eager anticipation.

And sure enough, a year later, she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had promised. Imagine the joyful tears and ear to ear smile that must have covered her face as she held her miracle boy in her arms! But after some time had passed—some scholars guess around 8 years later—something terrible happened.

The young boy began complaining of excruciating pain in his head. And just a few hours later, he died, cradled in his mother's arms. Imagine her face, once again covered in tears—but this time, tears of grief, confusion, and heartbreak. Why would God give her this miraculous child, only to take him away from her less than a decade later? Why him?

But she hadn't lost hope. Without telling anyone what had happened, she placed her son's lifeless body on the bed in Elisha's room, got a servant and a donkey, and set out to track down the Man of God. About 20 miles away, she found Elisha at Mount Carmel. And there, the bitter distress in her heart poured out from her mouth. ***"Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?"***

The Shunammite woman was wrestling with God in her grief and confusion. The "whys" that pour out so naturally at the death of a loved one mingled with her tears. And notice what Elisha doesn't do. He doesn't rebuke her, or tell her to stop crying because her son was in a better place. Just like Jesus doesn't reprimand Mary and Martha for their grief at the death of their brother. Jesus wept with them! Because death is heartbreaking, and ugly. Death fills us with grief, because it wasn't what God intended his people to face. Death is the product and consequence of sin and rebellion against God. So it's OK for you to grieve when someone you love dies too. It's not wrong to wrestle with God; to vocalize the "whys" that fill our hearts and minds. The Shunammite woman shows that it's possible to wrestle with God in confusion and grief, while still fully trusting in him!

That's why, when Elisha sends his servant to run ahead and lay his staff of the boy's lifeless face, the Shunammite woman says to Elisha, ***"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you."*** She knew that if it was God's will, the prophet through whom God had promised her miraculous son, could do something miraculous now too!

Both Elisha and the Shunammite woman knew where the power would come from—only the God who had miraculously produced life in her womb could give life to the dead. That's why, when Elisha shuts himself in the room with the dead boy, he first ***"prayed to the LORD."*** That's why, after Elisha's first attempts didn't revive the boy, he didn't give up. Because he trusted in the God who had previously allowed his mentor Elijah to bring a boy back to life too.

And once again, God delivered, when the boy who had been dead at least for hours if not days, ***"sneezed seven times and opened his eyes."*** And just as God had given her this son, he now gave her back her son!

Imagine the tears once again streaking down her cheeks, once again joyful, as she held her living, breathing boy in her arms. She and Elisha were witnesses of God's total power over death. Just as Mary, Martha, and all those gathered around Lazarus' tomb saw Jesus' power to give life to the dead when Jesus demanded, ***"Lazarus, come out!"*** and the formerly dead man obeyed!

How wonderful for them that God brought their loved ones back to life, right? But what's that to us? Because Jesus didn't call your loved one out of their casket at the funeral, did he? He didn't raise them up from their grave at the cemetery. Why not them?

Because God wanted to give life for the dead! Real life. Eternal life. Because as unbelievable as it was that God gave life to the dead, you know what eventually happened? That Shunammite boy Elisha brought back to life? He died again. And Lazarus, who walked out of his tomb alive—eventually was placed back into a tomb. If the best thing God can do for us is allow us to live our earthly lives again, what good does that do? Give us and our loved ones more time in this world of sin, sadness, and suffering until we eventually, inevitably die again?

Because the world, and so often we, get caught up in focusing only on this earthly life, death seems like it's the worst thing that could happen to us or others. That's why people spend so much time, and money, and effort in the hopes of not dying. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we should all just throw our earthly lives away and do nothing but wait to die. God has given us an earthly life for good reasons and purposes too. But if we're only focused on this life, then death is the end, and no hope or good can come from it.

But when you have faith that the man who raised Lazarus from the dead is the Son of God, and the Savior of the world, then we can look at our death, and the death of our Christian loved ones with an entirely different perspective. As Jesus comforted Mary and Martha, ***"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."***

Because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, that means that for the Christian, death is nothing more than a gateway to life that will never end, or return to a grave! Because of he who gives life to the dead, we know and believe that through death, the one who trusts in Jesus as Savior has life!

So, why them? Why did God choose to raise the Shunammite boy and Lazarus back to life? You might say he was paying an advance on the inheritance that awaits all who are co-heirs with Christ! By raising these two men back to life, God was driving into people's hearts the truth of his complete power over death! As we're told after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, ***"Therefore, many of the Jews...had seen what Jesus did, and believed in him."*** He was leading people to trust more fully, and look ahead more eagerly to the day when they also would be given life after death; to the day when their bodies, asleep in death, will be raised in perfect glory at the bodily resurrection all believers will experience at the Last Day!

Why not them? Because God knew the time was right to call the soul of your Christian loved ones home to himself, where death will be no more! Because God knew that one day, he will give you back your son; your brother; your spouse; your parents; your grandparents. Picture the tears of joy rolling down your cheeks; the ear to ear smiles permanently plastered on our faces, as we're given back the Christian dead we've lost—never to lose them again; never to die again.

We can be confident of this; because he who is the resurrection and the life, died and was placed in a grave. Through his death, you have life. And because he who called Lazarus out of his grave, walked out of his own on the third day, all those who die in Christ, will be raised with him; will live with him who gives life for the dead, and all those who believe in him, for eternity!