

## 10-25-09 1 Kings 17:17-24 “Living in the Upper Room” by Richard Boatman

It’s fun to live in the blessings of God. There’s just that sense that the Lord is taking care of us. Imagine the widow’s ongoing amazement as everyday she went to her jar of oil and bin of flour, and there was enough for yet another day, just like Elijah said there would be. Scores of times she must have shaken her head—it was surreal—but this miracle was actually happening to her. Perhaps she whispered, “Praise the Lord.” She was on a spiritual mountaintop. But then it happened:

**<sup>17</sup> Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing.**

Mountaintop experiences are great. Three of the disciples had such an encounter with Jesus. We call it the Mount of Transfiguration. You know the story. Peter, James and John—the elite three—were with him on the holy mount when suddenly, Jesus began to glow. When I was dating Larae, one of the employees at the Iowa Juvenile Home where I worked part-time said to me one day, “Richard, you’re in love aren’t you? You’re just glowing.” Well, that was nothing compared to what was happening with Jesus. The glory that was within was manifesting itself outwardly. Moses and Elijah appeared with him and then “a bright cloud overshadowed them; and...a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!’” The disciples were terrified.

It is one thing to *feel* God’s presence but even more powerful to be *in* the presence of God. That’s a mountaintop experience. Though they come at different levels of intensity and styles, we need them—those special encounters when God becomes very real. Youth often experience this at camp. Some adults have such encounters at retreat weekends such as the *Walk to Emmaus*. Mine came in my bedroom with a quiet prayer of surrender. But oh how that summer of my conversion was filled with glory. Then, summer ended, and I had to go back to school.

You see, we cannot live on the mountaintop. After the transfiguration was over, verse 9 of Matthew 17 says, “And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus...said, ‘Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.’” Notice, *they came down from the mountain*, for it is in the valley where we must live out our faith. We celebrate God’s presence in our worship service and the richness of fellowship we have on Sunday mornings, but the metal of our faith is tested in the valley of daily living. When everything is wonderful and upbeat; when there’s *oil in the jar and flour in the bin that never runs out*, it’s easy to praise. But what happens when tragedy strikes in the valley? You lose your job or

your marriage crumbles or someone disappoints you or there's tension in the office or you get sick or, like today's passage, someone you love very much dies. You see, the "valleys" reveal much about our understanding *of* and our trust *in* God.

**<sup>18</sup> She [the widow] said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? You have come to remind me of my sin and kill my son."**

In one of the old *Seinfeld* episodes, George lost his glasses at a gym, so he was trying to function without them. While walking down the sidewalk squinting, he was quite certain he saw Jerry's girlfriend kissing another man. Jerry and his girlfriend got in a big fight over it, though she denied it. Later, George got his glasses and saw the same thing in the same place, only then he realized he was seeing a woman police officer holding her head close to her horse. George had had a distorted image of what was happening. The other day Michael was in my office. He didn't have his glasses on. He squinted and said, "Is that a bee in here?" I looked up and said, "No, it's a beetle. You need your glasses." A distorted image. For weeks I've known my mom wasn't seeing things that I could see quite easily. She recently had cataract surgery and is amazed at how clear things are now.

Like the widow woman, we can be around the things of God and even be recipients of the Lord's blessings, and still not see God with clarity. This woman's life had been prolonged by the hand of the Lord, yet when the "valley of death" came to her son, she assumed God's wrath. She had a distorted image; but I don't condemn her. When traumatic things occur, it's easy to look at God through the lens of our pain rather than through the lens of faith. Like cataracts over our heart, our spiritual eyes can become distorted with grief. All those many years ago when my professional life was uncertain and my personal life crumbled, I had no idea where the Lord was in the midst of it. I was numb and afraid and angry and frustrated. But I had enough of the Word in me that even though I could not *feel* God, I *trusted* God. I still remember the day I was driving home from college classes and the Lord touched me. It was as though my car became a mobile sanctuary, the Holy Spirit filled that vehicle and I knew I would make it.

One of the greatest blessings we are to bring to a hurting world is a clear image of God's love in the person of Christ. And that begins not with theological arguments but with the touch of compassion. The first thing Jesus did for a suffering leper was touch him. It defied Jewish Law but how it must have cleared his distorted image of God. Current thought was that the leper *or* his family must have sinned greatly for such a disease to have come. How many times the leper must have assumed God's wrath. And yet now he dared to approach Jesus. The leper who was

supposed to shout out “Unclean...Unclean!” dared to draw near to the Savior. For it is in Jesus that our distorted images of God are cleared up. What is God like? Look at the Savior. He touched him and healed him. He touches our lives where we are.

Christian author, sociologist and speaker Tony Campolo travels a lot. He often has jet lag, waking up in his motel room at strange hours. He tells of one occasion when in Honolulu waking up at 3 a.m., hungry for breakfast. Walking the streets he couldn't find anything open but a little greasy spoon in a back alley. While having a donut and a cup of coffee, eight or nine local prostitutes walked in being loud and a little rude. Campolo confesses to being uncomfortable and was planning on leaving when he heard the prostitute beside him say to another, “Tomorrow's my birthday. I'll be 39.” “What do you want from me, Agnes” her friend snapped, “a cake and a party?” “No,” Agnes said, “I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?” At this point an idea came to Tony Campolo—an idea that might help clear up the distorted vision of a 39 year-old prostitute. When the girls left, Tony found out from Harry, the unkempt owner that these girls came in every night at the same time. Campolo said, “Do you think we could throw a little birthday party for her here at your diner?” A cute little smile crept over the face of the heavy proprietor. “I like it,” he said. So they made their plans. The next night Campolo came back with decorations and a big cardboard sign that said, “Happy Birthday.” At 3:30 in the morning the girls all came walking in and Tony had everyone shout, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” And then they brought out the cake and Agnes lost it; in her whole life she'd never had anyone show her such love. Before the party was over, Harry found out that Tony Campolo was a preacher. He asked him, “What kind of a church do you belong to, anyway?” In one of those moments when just the right words come, Tony answers him quietly, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.” Harry thinks for a moment and says, “I'd join a church like that.” Listen to verse 19:

**<sup>19</sup> "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his bed.**

*Sympathy* feels the pain of another. But *compassion* holds the pain of another and carries it into God's presence. Notice that Elijah doesn't try to straighten out the widow's distorted theology. He embraces her pain; he takes her son into his arms. There is no greater theology than compassion. I believe it was St. Francis of Assisi who said, “Go everywhere preaching the gospel, and if you have to, use

words.” Elijah “took [the child] from her arms [and] carried him to the *upper room* where *he was living*.”

The upper room—it conjures powerful images in our mind. Though a different place and time, it was in the “upper room” where Jesus served the bread and wine to his disciples: “This is my body...this is my blood.” It was in the upper room where the disciples waited for and were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The upper room was a meeting place where heaven and earth intersected.

Though we cannot constantly live in the ecstasy of the mountaintop, this does not mean that we face the valley of daily living devoid of God’s powerful presence. I think God wants to use our lives—lives that have been “Jesusized”—as mobile “upper rooms,” places of hope for others where heaven and earth meet. See if you get this idea from Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:16-19 (Amplified): “May He grant you out of the rich treasury of His glory to be strengthened...with mighty power in [your] inner [being] by the (Holy) Spirit—indwelling your innermost being and personality. May Christ through your faith [actually] dwell—settle down, abide, make His permanent home—in your hearts! May you be rooted deep in love and founded securely on love, that you may have the power and be strong to apprehend and grasp with all the saints...what is the breadth and length and height and depth [of it]; [That you may really come] to know...the love of Christ, which far surpasses mere knowledge; that you may be filled...unto all the fullness of God—[that is] may have the richest measure of the divine Presence, and become a body wholly filled and flooded with God Himself!” Doesn’t that sound like the upper room...*filled and flooded with God Himself!*

Elijah brought hope to a woman by taking that which symbolized her despair to the upper room where he was living. When you and I prayerfully commune with God, when we interact with Scripture, meditating on God’s word, when we fellowship together and receive the grace of the sacraments—all of these act as the framework for an inner dwelling built by God as an inner upper room, a beacon of hope to those with whom we come in contact. God uses our very lives—indwelled by his life—to testify, to witness to the reality of God’s mission of restoration in and through Jesus Christ, the One who is mighty to save!