

We have just heard some amazing and terrifying stories this morning. The first from the Hebrew Scriptures involves the Prophet Elijah.

Elijah, you see, is on the run because he has angered the political powers that be. And the word of the Lord comes to him and tells him to go to Zarephath, a town in Phoenicia, where a widow will take care of him. Elijah goes there and meets a widow near the gate of the town and asks her for water and food.

This is a time of a severe drought and famine and the widow replies that she is gathering a few sticks to cook a last meal for herself and her son before they die. But Elijah repeats his request, telling her that her jar of meal and jug of oil will be full until it rains. The widow goes and does as he asks and Elijah, the widow and her household eat for many days.

Now a widow in those days would have no one to provide for her, she would have to survive through her own efforts and the efforts of her son. So she would greatly appreciate Elijah's help in providing the unlimited groceries.

All seems well for many days until the moment when the widow's son becomes critically ill and stops breathing. The widow cries out to Elijah "What have I done. Have you come to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son?"

But Elijah takes the boy to his upstairs room and prays to God, "Let this child's life come to him again!" The child lives. And Elijah takes the boy downstairs and gives him to his mother.

The second amazing and terrifying story is from the Gospel according to Luke. As Jesus and his followers come to the outskirts of a town about a three hour walk from Nazareth, they encounter a funeral procession. A young man who has died is being carried out to be buried. He is his widowed mother's only son and for her to lose him will be catastrophic for her, for without a male to head up her family, she will have a hard time surviving. And with no heir left all her personal property will revert to her dead husband's family.

Jesus has compassion for this widow. He tells her not to cry. Then he touches the bier and tells the young man to rise. This is doubly shocking behavior on Jesus' part. To touch the bier would make him, as a Hebrew man, ritually impure. And to show compassion, in the Greek culture of the Roman occupiers, was considered a sign of weakness in a man.

And yet Jesus, in his compassion, touches the bier and tells her son to rise. And the dead son rises and begins to speak and Jesus gives him back to his mother. And of course the news spreads rapidly throughout all Judea by the grapevine.

Two widows about to lose their futures with the death of their only sons have their son's lives restored and given back to them.

These are truly gifts of life, not only the gift of life given to the sons, but also the ongoing gift of life to their mothers. What a gift from God!

God is not only our hope and strength and ongoing life, God calls us to live as Jesus did. We Christians who follow Jesus are also called to give life to others.

How do we give life to others? For one local example, this church, working with the children's clinic, gives new life to seriously disabled children. We help them gain mobility, the ability to communicate, better nutrition, eyesight and hearing, enabling them to break through the barriers they face and live more active lives.

We also give life to people through Episcopal Relief and Development providing disaster relief in this country and throughout the world, most recently in Haiti where ERD was already working with the Diocese of Haiti. Through ERD's work in some 65 countries we also provide health care, education and development aid to help the poor to build homes and start businesses. ERD also supports clinics and schools.

I saw some of ERD's work close up and personal last week while representing the Diocese of Arizona at an ERD Conference in Belize, a diocese of the Anglican Province of the West Indies. During the conference we took some field trips, one day to visit Anglican church schools, and the other to visit some small businesses and farms which have received micro-loans from ERD through a Belize organization called BEST. In many countries micro loans may be as little as \$30 or \$50 dollars. In Belize they can be a thousand dollars, and a second loan to someone who repays on time may be for somewhat more.

On the first field trip my group visited a school in Orange Walk where we were able to sit in on a special education class being taught HIV/AIDS prevention – in SIGN LANGUAGE!

The next day we visited the farm of Belize's Woman Farmer of the Year, a daughter of Salvadoran refugees who came to Belize. By taking out a series of micro-loans from ERD she has developed a farm with 15 cows and grows vegetables, which she sells to the market in Belize City three times a week. She has built one greenhouse where she is growing green peppers up poles and is about to build a second greenhouse to grow tomatoes by the same method.

We also visited a couple of shops started with micro-loans as well as the home workshop of a wood carver who makes beautiful items for the tourist market at a nearby Mayan ruin who got a micro-loan from ERD through BEST to purchase much needed tools. Note that the wood carvers have to get permits from the government to cut single native hardwood trees. I bought a beautiful cane from him made from the granadillo tree, better known to us as pomegranate.

This was the first time Episcopal Relief and Development has held a conference outside the United States, and it was very informative, especially for those among the group who had never been to a third world country. It truly inspired all of us to do more for ERD. The focus over the next few years will be on expanding the Nets for Life program in sub-Saharan Africa to reduce the deaths of children and pregnant women from malaria.

I am particularly fired up about the Nets for Life program, having done research on pesticide use on crops and for malaria control in Central America back in the early 1970's, just as the battle against malaria was beginning to lose ground there and in other parts of the world. In fact our research group was one of the first to report that malaria was on the rise.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest death rate from malaria due to a number of factors. The first is that they have the highest incidence of the most deadly strain of malaria, the falciparum parasite. The second is that the anopheles mosquitoes in Africa, the females of which must have a blood meal in order to reproduce, have the highest rate of biting on humans, especially children and pregnant women, rather than biting other animals. The third is that many sub-Saharan countries do not have the level of medical care and disease prevention programs especially needed in rural areas to control the spread of malaria.

Providing bed nets which are impregnated with insecticide, at the cost of \$12 a net, to protect children and pregnant women from being bitten by mosquitoes, combined with training local medical home health aides to diagnose and treat those infected with malaria, and to treat other members of their families with prophylactic medicines, can cut transmission of the disease dramatically and thereby prevent the deaths of great numbers of children.

In poor countries with little social security for those who reach an old age or who are infirm, security is dependent on one's children growing up and taking care of their aging parents, who are as dependent on their children as were the widows in biblical times whose stories we heard this morning.

ERD now estimates that the work it has already done distributing Nets for Life has kept some 65,000 children in sub-Saharan Africa from dying.

That may not be quite as dramatic as raising a child from the dead, but, to my mind, it sure comes close.

Amen.