

June 9, 2013
1 Kings 17:8-24
Psalm 146
Galatians 1:11-24
LUKE 7:11-17

WHAT NEXT?

God does not do triage.

On the battlefield, medics have to decide, often very quickly, where to focus their attention, their skills, their resources. Some people may have wounds or injuries which are superficial or *relatively* minor and can afford to wait for a bit. Others may be moments from death and no amount of medical intervention may save their lives. Medics have to concentrate on everyone else, those whose wounds or injuries are severe but whose lives *may yet* be saved by medical intervention.

Emergency Rooms operate by the same principal: incoming patients go through triage. Those whose conditions are not immediately life-threatening may be in great pain and be extremely frustrated by being told to wait, but if you are told to wait by the triage nurse, that's actually good news.

The son of the widow in Zarephath in this morning's Old Testament story was *beyond* triage. But not to the great prophet Elijah, because Elijah knows that God does not *do* triage. No one's case is hopeless to God. The child was dead. But that did not mean he was beyond God's power or God's love.

The son of the widow of Nain in today's Gospel reading was *beyond* triage. But not to Jesus, because Jesus knows that God does not do triage. No one's case is hopeless to God. The young man was dead. But that did not mean he was beyond God's power or God's love.

You may remember how in Chapter 11 of John's Gospel Martha, the sister of Lazarus, protested when Jesus told the bystanders to roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb of her dead brother. Implicitly, she thought that would be a complete waste of time and effort. What, did Jesus think that if the stone were rolled away, Lazarus would just walk out of the tomb in response to Jesus' words?

Well yes, actually.

God does not consider anyone to be hopeless. God's standards are not human standards. That really takes some getting used to, even for people who have many years in faith formation. It's so easy for us to resume the "default setting" of worldly attitudes, that only certain things are possible, only certain people -- or creatures -- are worth our efforts.

And some people don't even do triage, because that involves focusing our efforts where, according to rational scientific analysis, they could make the most difference in improving the lives of the suffering. Sometimes people ignore even the *slightly* unhealthy or poor, and focus their efforts on care for the healthy and wealthy. How many billions of dollars are spent each year on completely optional cosmetic surgeries which are truly vanity treatments? How many billions of dollars in tax benefits and governmental expenditures are showered on those who really don't need them?

By comparison, what strange taste God has, what counter-cultural preferences. God has created a planet in which there are literally countless species which we human beings cannot exploit for our own benefit. (Cicadas come to mind.) What was the point of *that*, some might ask? Why, there are also species which scientists estimate exist but haven't been identified yet, though some of them might be before we drive them into extinction. Why did God bother? Isn't life all about *homo sapiens*, all about us, our needs, our wants?

Psalm 146 declares, "The LORD made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever." Is it possible God makes a promise to others besides *homo sapiens*? One of these days I think we will begin to learn about life beyond earth. Perhaps *that* discovery is what will challenge our species' profound self-centeredness, which is part of our Sin with a capital "S".

Even among *people*, God has such strange, counter-cultural tastes. The psalm continues, God "gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger." Aren't people who are oppressed just "losers" and people who are hungry just "lazy" or "liars"? I hear some voices saying that. But not God's voice.

The psalmist continues, "The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down...the LORD cares for the stranger; he sustains the widow and the orphan." Looks like there's a pattern here. And then the psalmist says, "The LORD loves the righteous...but frustrates the way of the wicked."

Perhaps the psalmist sees being "righteous" as *having the same taste God has*: being an ally of those who are *powerless and suffering*, and not partying with those

up-trodden people who are clueless, overly self-indulgent or exploitative. Maybe being righteous includes caring for the whole of God's Creation as it has evolved and developed, not eliminating species, populations or varieties because at the moment they seem to be unuseful to *us*, and besides because we human beings can do a better job of managing climate than God can and *we* can and should direct evolution *ourselves*. Personally, I have my doubts about whether or not humanity is wise or good enough for those responsibilities.

Christians are called to challenge humanity's self-absorption and its bias toward the powerful, and look at God's priorities and Christ's behavior instead.

Christ Church has been in the heart of the City of New Brunswick for over 270 years and is a part of this city's fabric. At different times in its history it has been more conscious of and allied with the down-trodden around it than at other times.

This Sunday, we just heard the story of the promise of food the prophet Elijah made to a foreigner, a pagan, a widow -- someone beyond the pale of God's care according to some of Elijah's contemporaries, and to some of the contemporaries of Jesus, who lifted up this story as an example of God's "out of the box" thinking. Therefore this Sunday we are celebrating our church's long-standing involvement with Elijah's Promise Soup Kitchen in New Brunswick, and our volunteers who serve there.

We are celebrating our new relationship with Americorps which, at least for the summer, is providing leadership for our Food Pantry at no cost to us, enabling Food Pantry contributions to go farther. Our Food Pantry has expanded its offerings beyond food to include bi-lingual educational materials on nutrition, health, domestic violence and drug abuse prevention. Most recently our Community Gardens initiative is putting some of our downtown land to use for *agriculture*, to, in the words of the *Magnificat* "fill the hungry with good things", in this case fresh locally-grown vegetables. We are adding yet another 12 Step Recovery group to the list of those which use our facilities for weekly meetings, because to the Higher Power, no case is hopeless.

We also provide shelter for homeless men every winter, though recently our volunteer numbers have declined and imperiled our ability to staff this effort. Last year, we had special offerings for "Nets for Life" -- anti-malarial work in sub-Saharan Africa -- and for a children's library in Sierra Leone, although at this moment those seem like "one and done" campaigns. But the world's needs are not done.

How will Christ Church in the next few years be an ally of those for whom God cares particularly -- the foreigner, the orphan, the widow, prisoners, the blind, those who are bowed down, the hungry, and the oppressed?

You stand at the brink of a new rectorship. It is a time for vision -- vision on the part of your candidates for rector, *and also* on the part of your Rector Search Committee and Vestry *and* of the *entire* congregation. No rector can do it by her- or himself. God's *people* are called to be visionaries, and to work to prepare the way for the Kingdom of God, where there is no hunger, oppression, disease, violence, blindness or imprisonment of any kind.

You have done a lot. But don't rest on your laurels. Be bold. Be heirs of Elijah and empowered followers of Jesus. By the power of God, give hope where there is little or none. Give life.

In conclusion, I invite you to join me in praying the words of Walter Russell Bowie which form Hymn #583 in The Hymnal 1982:

“O holy city, seen of John, where Christ, the Lamb, doth reign,
within whose foursquare walls shall come no night, nor need, nor pain,
and where the tears are wiped from eyes that shall not weep again!

“O shame to us who rest content while lust and greed for gain
in street and shop and tenement wring gold from human pain,
and bitter lips in blind despair cry ‘Christ has died in vain.’

“Give us, O God, the strength to build the city that hath stood
to long a dream, whose laws are love, whose crown is servanthood,
and where the sun that shineth is God's grace for human good.

“Already in the mind of God that city riseth fair:
lo, how its splendor challenges the souls that greatly dare --
yea, bids us seize the whole of life and build its glory there.”

The Rev. Dr. Francis A. Hubbard
Christ Episcopal Church, New Brunswick, New Jersey