

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
 on 5 February 2006 (Epiphany 5): 2 Kings 4:8-37; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Healing Our Brokenness

This has been a traumatic week in the life of our community. One of our own has been involved in the most heart-breaking, mind-numbing events imaginable. And so has his family. And so has this community, which has loved Dewain and Ginia as together we have worshipped, grown, and served in this place. So it is that I will not preach this morning as I normally do but rather take the opportunity as your Rector and priest to gather St. Martin's together because there are some serious things that I need to say to you. What I have to say surely has to do with what happened to Dewain; but more to the point it is crucial for us to realize what all this has to do with us and with our faith.

Yet, before I go on, I do want to say that this is a time for the St. Martin's community to gather together, to be steady and emotionally honest in prayer and witness. It is not a time for idle chatter or gossip about this tragedy. So, please, exercise some charitable discipline, if you find yourselves involved in a discussion about these events. Simply say that the Herrings are members of St. Martin's; we are committed to them, and that our entire community is praying for all who are involved. Nothing more need be said because to speak about this tragedy as if it were something remote or some local version of a bad soap opera runs the risk of avoiding its meaning for each of us. And it is the meaning for each of us that I want to speak this morning.

In order for me to do this, I need to set some context with you. Let me begin to do this by calling your attention to the icon in the chancel.

It comes to us from the 6th century. The original can be found in St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai. It is the oldest known icon in the Christian tradition. It is written in the style of "Christ the Pantokrator," that is, "Christ, the Ruler of the Universe," and it conveys several stylized insights.

For instance, you can see the golden nimbus around the head of Christ. This symbolizes his holiness. You can also see that the Bible is held in the crook of Jesus' left arm and that it is clasped shut, indicating that all this is contained in holy scripture can be seen in the risen Christ. You may notice that the right hand of the Christ is poised in traditional blessing, with the first two fingers extended together, signifying the two natures of Christ (divine and human) and the last two fingers coming together with the thumb, symbolizing the unity of the Trinity.

Yet, for me and for most who honor this icon, the face of Christ is the riveting key. At first glance – and especially for us westerners – the face looks funny. It appears as if the artist – the icon writer – has made a mechanical mistake in rendering the face. But to leave it at this point is to miss the icon's message completely.

What the writer wants us to see (and thereby to know) can be accomplished, if we cover the left half of the Christ's face. What is revealed is the serene, triumphant "Ruler of the Universe." Doing the same thing on the other side reveals a triumphant Christ who weeps with great sadness. Christ weeps at our brokenness and pain. He weeps at our refusal to receive the healing and new life that God in Christ has given.

That's the first part of the context. A second aspect involves four questions that I have offered to you on several other occasions and at several different times. They come from a contemporary theologian and scholar; and I believe they call us to a simple honesty about an unsubsidized, responsible faith. The questions are:

- What is the character of your God?
- What is the content of your faith?
- What is the purpose of your prayer?
- What is the function of your church?

With the icon in sight and these four questions in mind, let me now speak very briefly about the Old Testament lesson for today and use it as a third piece of context in the form of a story.

The incredibly beguiling story of the Prophet Elisha and the Shunammite woman is one of my favorites. Having lived through the trauma of this week at very close range, I am particularly struck by one element in this wondrous narrative. The story, with all its restrained-yet-compelling drama, is a story about what it means and what it takes to be in relationship with God. In fact, it can be said that this story raises the issue of what we know about our God. And as we face what in fact is the uneasy reality of what we know about God, the story also begins to peck away at the second question: "What is the content of your faith?" We can put all this another way: Knowing this God, do you trust the Holy One with your life?

In terms of the story, we have two significant characters. One is the Shunammite woman; the other is the holy man, the Prophet Elisha.

The Shunammite woman is someone we know quite well. She is a strong, mature, well-off female with a nice house, a hard-working husband, and a profitable family

business. Moreover, she has a passionate-but-quiet faith that she honors. Yet, not unfamiliarly, she also tries to keep her faith confined to the manageable parts of her life. What she will soon discover with heart-breaking clarity is that God cannot be confined; nor can any part of our lives be hidden from our God.

The other character is also someone we know or know about. As Elisha goes about his prophetic ministry, passing by her house, the Shunammite woman discerns that he is a holy man and that because she and her husband are God-fearing folk they ought to do something outward and visible to assist the prophet in his ministry. After all, they have an available mother-in-law apartment that he surely could use to rest from his demanding peripatetic work. So, the woman and the prophet meet, and the fact of the matter is that nothing is ever the same for either of them again. They will be changed by virtue of knowing God and meeting God.

The Shunammite woman's gesture of discernment and hospitality gains her the prophet's gratitude; and in turn, Elisha wishes to acknowledge this unexpected and faithful stewardship. From the surface of things, the prophet has a hard time figuring out what gift might suffice. After all, the Shunammite woman has everything she needs – or so it would seem. Then, Gehazi, Elisha's servant, says that the woman does not have a son, to which the prophet gleefully announces that, by the power of God, next year at that time, the woman will bear a son.

Tellingly, the announced gift does not cause the woman immediate joy, and here is the point I see in the narrative. The woman's barrenness harbors her deep hurt and brokenness, and she has marshaled all her strength to hide this heartbreak away and guard it from ever being touched. But now with this birth, God has picked this tender

scab. We can and do adjust to the experience of life's scarcity. However, life's abundance (especially as it comes from God) causes most of us problems.

The Shunammite woman did a good, faithful thing to God's holy man. She gave him a place to rest and to retreat, but it also meant that she was opening herself up to God's presence, especially those hurtful parts of her heart that she thought she had managed to packed away neatly.

Well, you know the story. The Shunammite woman has a son, just as Elisha said. He grows up to join his father in tending the fields, but then, the worst nightmare occurs. The Shunammite woman's deepest fears come to pass, when her precious son dies in her arms. She had opened her heart to God, only to have it broken again.

Her response to this debilitating tragedy is very revealing of her character, however. She does not fall apart. She does not become another victim. Rather, she pursues Elisha with a quiet vengeance, until she compels him to face her and her shattered life.

As for Elisha's part, the old religious formulas he knows and relies upon did not fix the situation. The old incantations and expressions of prophetic power fail to resurrect the child. Not until he, himself, is forced to lie upon the boy's death (face-to-face) does the mother receive her son again.

And here is the message for me, especially in the vortex of this week's events. God is not someone or something to be played with or taken for granted. The Holy One is not someone or something to be kept in a tight box and let out at our convenience – no, not in the least. Our God knows our hearts better than we do, and in his presence we are challenged to open to him that which we

would rather hide, even from ourselves. For God knows that healing – if it is to be real -- is from the inside out. God also knows that ignoring the hurt or trying to manage it does not make it go away.

Last Saturday night, at Kanuga, we held the traditional "Family Weekend" healing liturgy. We offered prayers, reflected on scripture; we confessed our sins – all in preparation for the opportunity to receive the laying on of hands and anointing for healing. Surprisingly, many people actually attended, and many people even came forward – one at a time – to name their hurt in quiet privacy and to receive special blessing.

This week, a member of the parish who was in that congregation mentioned to me that she was especially touched by the amount of pain and brokenness present that night. It is also a bit overwhelming for me, too, to hear the sacred requests for healing and to feel the hurt and the need for wholeness. I always regard as especially brave those who attend the healing service and ask for special healing. To come forward and to ask for what one needs but cannot give to oneself is a great step forward in the spiritual life. I say this because brokenness is a big part of what it means to be human, what it means to be us. And the fact is that no matter how well we compartmentalize our painful brokenness, it still sits in our hearts; it still eats at our souls; it still waits to erupt and to take us by surprise.

It takes a lot for most of us to admit that we are not in control of our lives and that we need God's help and healing. Our pride is strong; our shame often deep. It is so easy to believe that we are the only ones who are so fractured, to the extent that our "secret" must be kept at all costs.

As I try to sort out my own feelings from this past week, I recognize how sad I feel and

how frustrated I am. I feel as if you have hired me to be a lifeguard, waiting to pull people out of the deep water; but very few seem to want to learn how to swim. Some, it would seem, don't even want to get wet. Consequently, I also wonder who will be available to guide me and my brokenness toward healing.

My point is that our life together as a church is not frivolous. It matters, and it matters a great deal. What we do, especially in worship, is not meant to be entertaining or even inspirational. It is meant to be real. It is meant to remind us first of all that we belong to God, and that God has given us to one another for encouragement in becoming whole, which is what God desires us to be. Belonging to God and to one another as the church is not just another thing to squeeze into our over-scheduled lives. It is, quite literally, a matter of life and death – that we “do this” so that we can remember (and not forget) our God and his victorious-yet-still-grieved Christ.

We come here to remember three simple things, and I have tried to express these three things to you consistently and creatively. They are: that God has given us the life we need; that our task, therefore, is to say “thank you” – with our lives and not just with our lips; that receiving this precious gift means that our job is to share the joy and the power and the healing with those we meet.

I will close with a statement that Nelson Mandela offered, as he wondrously emerged from the brokenness of his life to change a good part of the world. In this season of Epiphany, it reflects what I think God sees in us and what we need to help one another see in ourselves. Here is the statement.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not

our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. You are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within you.

Epiphany. Amen.