

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ✠
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Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers.

¹⁹ "My head! My head!" he said to his father. His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." ²⁰ After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. ²¹ She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

²² She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return."

²³ "Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." "It's all right," she said.

²⁴ She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you."

²⁵ So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, "Look! There's the Shunammite!"

²⁶ Run to meet her and ask her, 'Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?'" "Everything is all right," she said.

²⁷ When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why."

²⁸ "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'"

²⁹ Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face."

³⁰ But the child's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So he got up and followed her.

³¹ Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened."

³² When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. ³³ He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy's body grew warm. ³⁵ Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

³⁶ Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." ³⁷ She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

2 Kings 4:18-37

It's not usually considered a very nice thing to get people's hopes up. For example, I know better than to tell my children that we might be able to go to the park this afternoon – if I don't know for sure that we will. I don't want to get their hopes up. The truth is, it might not happen. And they'll be disappointed if it doesn't. So if I just don't say anything at all, they'll never know the difference.

In 2 Kings chapter 4, a woman from the town of Shunem probably felt like the prophet Elisha should have done that very thing. He shouldn't have said anything. He shouldn't have gotten her hopes up. But as we look at this section, let's look and see that it was really God who got her hopes up. Let's look and see that **GOD RAISES OUR HOPES** also. He raises our hopes so that we will trust in him, and he will not let us down. God will not disappoint.

The verses we read earlier as our first lesson are really just the second half of the story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman. In the first 17 verses we learn that this woman welcomed the prophet Elisha into her home. He stayed there when he was traveling. She even made an extra room for him. Elisha and his servant Gehazi offered to do something for her in return. Gehazi noticed that she didn't have a son and that her husband was old. So Elisha told her that within a year she would have a son.

The woman replied to that promise in a strange way. She said, **"No, my lord, Don't mislead your servant, O man of God."** It wasn't that she didn't want a son. Most likely it was something that she wanted very deeply. Perhaps it was something she was waiting for for many years. It was her highest of hopes. But she didn't want to be disappointed if it didn't happen. Maybe she had grown used to the idea that she and her husband would die without an heir. It seemed too incredible to her. Too unbelievable. She didn't want to get her hopes up.

But the woman did have a son, just as Elisha said. But of course it wasn't Elisha who gave the woman a son. Elisha was a prophet, a man of God. It was God who gave this woman a son. God is the one from whom all blessings flow. God is the one who gives a gift to this woman that is more than she even dared to hope.

But by doing that, God raised her hopes. God showed to her that he is able to do the things that she was even afraid to ask, because she didn't think it was even possible. God raised her hopes.

And the boy grew. We're not told how old the boy was when he went out with his father in the fields. He was young enough to be carried and to sit on his mother's lap. That's what happened. The boy cried that his head hurt, the servant carried him to Mom. Mom holds him until noon and he dies in her arms.

How awful. This woman experienced what could very well be the greatest earthly loss humans can ever experience – the death of a child. This child may have been the one thing that she wanted most, but didn't dare to hope for – because of this very possibility. Perhaps she wondered now why God had even given this son to her if he was only going to take him away again – and so soon.

Her grief is so severe that when she came to see Elisha she fell at his feet and took hold of him. She cried, "I didn't even ask for a son. And I told you then, 'Don't raise my hopes.'"

But it is at this very point, when her hopes seemed to have been dashed to pieces, that we see evidence that her hope was not lost.

Consider this: When the boy died, where did she take him? She went up and set the dead boy on the prophet's bed. Not the boy's bed, not prepared for burial, but upstairs in the private room of the traveling man of God. And then she leaves. Immediately she gets one of her husband's donkeys and makes haste to the prophet. The husband doesn't understand his wife's be-

havior. He doesn't understand why she should go to the prophet when it's not a church day. But she wants to go straight there. When she gets close, she meets Elisha's servant who came out to find out what's wrong, and she hardly gives him the time of day. She wants to get to the prophet. She wants to go to the one who promised her this child.

When God granted her this son, he raised her hopes. She didn't hope in Elisha. She trusted in God. And now in her deepest hour of grief. When her hopes seem to be dashed, she doesn't turn to her husband for comfort. She doesn't turn to the memory of her son. She turns to God. She trusts in God, because it was God who raised her hopes to him.

When God's people experience loss – whether it is this kind of extreme case, or something really minor by comparison – I think that two specific temptations occur. The first is to be disappointed in God. The second is to be disappointed in yourself. The first is the temptation to blame God for being careless with our hopes. As though God lifts us up with his promises and with all kinds of blessings, but then he does not follow through, or he takes back the blessings he gives. This temptation is dangerous, because it makes God into the enemy, as though God were against us.

But the second temptation is also dangerous. This temptation is especially directed at the Christian who knows and believes what Romans chapter 8 says, **“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”** As Christians we know that God does not work to harm us. God doesn't raise our hopes and then fail us. But in times of loss, heartache, disaster, we are tempted to say, “Oh, I know all that stuff, but I'm too weak to believe it. I must not be a very good Christian, because I still feel the loss. Because I still hurt. And I can't get my hopes up again.”

But here's the thing: we don't have to. God raises our hopes. Remember what Elisha did. It's actually a rather strange account. Elisha first sends his servant to run ahead, place his staff on the boy. When Elisha arrives he prays, he lays on the bed on top of the boy. When his body got warm, Elisha got up, walked around the room, then did it again. Then the boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

Were Elisha's actions like some kind of witch doctor's spell? Was there some kind of magical force to Elisha's methods? No, this was the power of God working through his prophet. This is the same power of God that Elisha used to perform as many as 8 miracles in the next three chapters of this book. It's the same power Jesus used to raise Lazarus in the Gospel.

It was God who gave her a son. It was God who raised him from the dead. It was God who once again, raised her hopes. But now her hope in God is not just limited to fulfilling her greatest desires. Now her hope in God extends even beyond this life, beyond the grave. Now she knows that God raises the dead, and even more amazingly – God not only raises all hopes, he fulfills all hopes. He doesn't disappoint.

But, someone might say, Elisha raised this woman's son, but she was certainly not the only woman in Israel who mourned over a child. Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus. He raised the son of the widow from Nain. He raised his friend Lazarus, but there were many more people in the land who watched their children die. There were so many other graves occupied by dear loved ones, young and old. He didn't raise any of them. He hasn't returned our departed loved ones to us. In many cases, he hasn't stopped hardship from knocking at our door. He hasn't stopped trial. He doesn't keep all pain, danger, disaster from us. Why not? He's all powerful, isn't he? In the Gospel today, Mary and Martha knew that if Jesus had been there, Lazarus would not have died. They knew that he had that kind of power. We also might say, “Lord, if

you had been here, you could have prevented this from happening. Lord, you could have stopped this. Why not?"

Because God wants to raise our hopes. He wants to raise our hopes so that we might trust in him beyond the things of this world that come and go. He wants to raise our hopes beyond our investment accounts, beyond our livelihood and homes, beyond the things that we hold most dear – our friends, our family, our own lives. He wants to raise our hopes beyond this earthly life. He wants to raise our hopes beyond the grave, beyond death.

That's what Jesus did for Martha. He turned her attention from her brother's death to the resurrection. Jesus raised her hopes to the resurrection of the dead. But Jesus raised them even further. **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die."** He raises her hopes to him, who is the Christ, the Son of God, whom God also raised from the dead. And those who hope in him will also live. They have spiritual life in him – right now. Their sins, their doubts, their attachment to the things of this world – are taken away. And they will live with him forever.

God raises our hopes. He gets our hopes up – but our God does not disappoint. Nowhere will we see that more clearly than in the next two weeks. Holy week is not far away. Before too long we will be walking with Jesus on his own path through loss, trial, suffering, and death. We will once again remember the extent to which our Savior went to pay the price for our sin. But even in these days – especially in these days – God is raising up our hopes, raising our hopes so that we may also – in our own days of loss, trial, suffering and death – trust in him who is the resurrection and the life – our resurrection and our life, and our highest hope. Amen.