

**Not a Tame Lion**  
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Psalm 146  
1 Kings 17:9-24  
Luke 7:11-17

The Psalm for this morning reads like a job description — **Help wanted:** Small, desert dwelling tribe, seeks deity. Creativity a must. Duties include executing justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry and releasing prisoners. The right candidate will have medical expertise and experience in social services. Omnipotence a plus. Miracles accepted in lieu of references. No phone calls.

Now imagine that you're one of God's supervisors. You've hired The Great I AM, the Lord of Hosts. After a three-year term, would you offer God a renewal of contract?

If I were to invent a God, ours would not be it! I want a God more like the one in the Psalms — one who gives my enemies what they deserve and raises me up. One who works justice for the oppressed. I had a sore throat this past week. A God of *my* design would have fixed that right up!

In the stories of healing we heard this morning, God seems at first glance to be at least a little more effective. But let's look at them a little more closely, and from the perspective of a supervisor. How would you judge God's performance here?

In 1 Kings, God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath where a widow will feed him. Keep in mind there's an awful drought going on. Elijah gets to the city and finds the widow. She's starving to death. Seems like a poor choice of someone to

feed a prophet. But Elijah gives God the benefit of the doubt. And God pulls of a miracle. Sort of.

Again, if I were writing God's job description, I would have gone for an end to the drought. Provide food for everybody! Or else a feast for the community. Or at the very least, a decent meal for the widow's family and Elijah.

Instead they get meal cakes. Yum.

Following that meager provision, apparently the widow's child still isn't doing well. God uses Elijah to pull him back from the brink of death. Score one in the God column. But it doesn't really seem like God's A game, does it? Why was the child sick in the first place? Oh yeah, the drought. But we shouldn't really blame God for that, should we? That gets awfully close to Calvinism. But wait... look at what Elijah says to wicked King Ahab just a few verses before sharing crumb-cakes with the widow: "As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

All in all, I think I'd grade God at about a C- in that story. Sure, the parlor tricks were kind of neat, but really they just put a bandage on a whole world of hurt that God was responsible for in the first place.

A trip too far down this road will lead us into deep trouble. If we consider it God's job to take care of all of the world's problems, then we make God a failure. Suffering persists. Drought comes. Sometimes all we get to eat is meal-cake. Some people don't even get that much.

This is, I believe, a big problem for Calvinists. If one believes that God has preordained everything, and that God is able to do or change anything, then by

extension that means that God is actually directly responsible for everything. Calvinists say that we can't understand what God chooses to do because we as humans are fallen and depraved, and God as God is sovereign (and more sovereign than loving). To me this God sounds depraved.

But even for non-Calvinists, it is useful to reflect on God's sovereignty. That doctrine reminds us that God does not fit into our theological constructs or ethical boxes. God's inbreaking — the healings and miracles that offer a glimpse of creation as God intends it — are beyond our comprehension and control. God does not bow to the job descriptions we write. In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the Christ-figure Aslan is occasionally described as “not a tame lion.” I think that's a fair description of God. While we might often feel it would be useful to keep God on a leash or to have God act at our command, we must recognize God's sovereignty — the fact that God is not tame, and we are not God's boss.

But we're still left with the problem of pain and suffering. Even if we don't view everything as pre-ordained, we still have to ask where God is in the here-and-now. Could God do something about suffering? Famine? War? Does God choose not to?

Of course, a big part of the problem is that God seems to rely heavily on sub-contractors. Using people as hands and feet and whatnot. God's son tells us that we'll be judged according to how we treat “the least of these.” We're responsible for the widows, the orphans, the suffering, the sick.

Well that's just *great*. When your employees are completely unreliable, that reflects poorly on you as well. Hasn't God figured that out yet?

I was describing my progress on this sermon to Maria yesterday; I told her, "I'm about halfway through, and now I've got to figure out how to make God good again."

Our God is not one that we can control or manipulate. God does not submit to our agendas. God's direct interventions are so rare that we have to call them miracles. And yet, somehow, I believe that God stands among us and with us. Perhaps most importantly, God walks beside us.

In the Luke reading, notice Jesus' reaction when he saw the widow who had lost her son. He "had compassion for her and said to her, do not weep." His (and by extension, God's) motivation for the miracle was deep compassion — a profound understanding of and identification with the suffering of another. Did God and God's only begotten son recognize something of themselves in this widow and her only begotten son? Did the image of a parent who had lost a child offer Jesus a foretaste of what he would also experience? Whatever the case, before the miracle, there was presence. God was present with the suffering; God had dried the tears of the widow.

In the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarepheth, we see Elijah playing a very similar role to Jesus. He was the embodiment of the presence of God. And in that role, he experienced the same things that the widow and her family did. He too starved through the drought. He subsisted on the meal-cakes. And along with the widow, he cried out to God in frustration and anger when her child fell ill. How must this have seemed to the widow? The person who represented God to

her shared in her grief; her fear; her heartbreak. And in the midst of all of it, God moved.

I have learned on many occasions that whatever gifts I have to offer, whatever wise words or potential solutions, pale in comparison to the simple act of being present. Sitting by the bedside of someone who is sick. Listening to the story of someone who is frustrated. Holding the hand of a child who is afraid.

What if God is like that? Not like the God of my job description, but a God who walks with us and listens to us — who shares in our suffering, and rejoices in our triumphs. What if God is present with us in the form of our community — in the face of our neighbors?

I don't want to leave God entirely off the hook, of course. I still believe that God is responsible for bringing about justice, peace and healing. And I believe that God does act; but perhaps in ways we might not choose or expect. And we still have that pesky role as subcontractors — doing much of God's dirty-work. Our task is lighter, though, when we recognize that God is here among us.