

In so many places in the Gospels, we see Christ fulfilling the Old Testament or revealing the truths that were foretold by the prophets. In today's Gospel lesson, we get just such an example.

While the appointed Old Testament lesson certainly connects to this Gospel, as Christ is the God to whom Elijah prayed and who raised the widow's son, there's another, lesser-known Old Testament story that ties in to this Gospel account as well. In comparing these accounts, we'll see the wonderful love of our God, shown in the truth that, though we cannot reach out to God, He reaches out to us and saves us.

So what is this other Old Testament account? It deals with a name named Uzzah. Does that name sound familiar at all? Let's hear about him, from 2 Samuel chapter 6. "David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark. And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?"

It's really a tragic story. David and the Israelites are finally bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. It's a scene of great rejoicing, as they carry this visible example of God's presence with His people into their capitol city.

Now, they're bringing the ark by a cart, which isn't how the Lord had told them to transport it. In His Law, God commanded that the ark was to be carried by Levites using long poles connected to the ark.

But here, someone – or several people – had decided that it would be better to put the ark on an oxcart. Sure that was easier, more efficient, and after all it was a new cart, built just for the occasion. Surely diverging from the word of God would be okay, as long as you did it for good reasons, right?

Sadly, it turns out to not be okay. For whatever reason, the oxen stumble, and the ark begins to shift and slide and perhaps even start to tip off the cart. And so Uzzah reaches out his hand and grabs hold of the ark. He does so with good intent; he doesn't want the sacred object to fall and be broken, or the holy relics inside to be scattered and lost.

And yet in spite of good intentions, when he reaches out and touches the ark, he is struck dead. Now why is this? Uzzah was trying to do a good thing – why does it cost him his life? It's not because God delights in destroying His people. He tells us the exact opposite in His word, where He declares that He takes no pleasure even in the death of the wicked.

Uzzah's death happens, instead, because Uzzah, like all men, is a sinner. His human nature contains the corruption of sin, which he inherited from Adam. And his life contained sins of thought, word, and deed – as do the lives of all people.

God, though, is holy, pure, completely without defilement of sin or error or flaw. He is goodness with absolutely no evil mixed in. He is justice without the slightest hint of corruption. And so sin cannot exist in His presence. Otherwise, He would cease to be holy. And so, Uzzah, a sinner, reaches out to the ark of the sinless God, and is struck down.

We are shown in this account the reality that man cannot reach out and grasp the things of God. We cannot by our own efforts attain things such as forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and holiness. We aren't able to go find the Holy Spirit and pull Him into our hearts. We can't climb a ladder made of our own good works and reach heaven.

We can't do any of this, because we, like Uzzah, are sinful. All our good works, our best intentions, are still tainted with the stench of sin. When we do something good for someone else, our sinful flesh is always hoping that we'll get something out of it, maybe recognition, maybe a reward, maybe a good act done to use in return. When we try to live a "good" life, our sinful desires are right there, wanting others to look up to us and how good we are and try to be like us.

We want to think that our good deeds offset or cancel out our bad ones, and so we can be "good" on our own. But the Bible tells us clearly that, apart from faith, it is impossible to do any truly good work, because whatever we do will always be tainted by sin. We cannot offer a sacrifice worthy of God, because whatever we do will always be blemished, unworthy of His perfection and holiness.

The reality that man cannot attain the holiness of God on his own is evidenced by the simple fact that all men die. Uzzah's death was due to his sin. Our deaths are due to our sins. All die, because all sin. There is no one who has been able to banish wicked thoughts from his mind, to keep untrue words from coming out of his mouth, to do only good and never evil to his neighbors.

The most noble philosophers, the "holy" men of other religions, the most popular self-help authors and YouTubers, none have been able to put off sin, and so none have been able to avoid death. The grave takes them all. And if this is where we were left, we'd be like King David, stuck in fear, wondering "how can the ark of the Lord come to me?"

We cannot reach out to God, so instead He reaches out to us. That's the beautiful truth we see in our Gospel lesson this morning. God comes to His people, not in a magnificent golden ark crowned with mighty cherubim, but in simple human flesh.

The Lord of the universe becomes a man, walking this earth, appearing like an ordinary carpenter's son from Nazareth. Though no one at the time realizes it, it is the Almighty God who is coming near to the village of Nain.

And the procession He encounters is quite a different one than what Uzzah was involved in. Then, it had been a joyous procession as the ark of the living God was being brought to the city. Here, it is a procession filled with weeping and lament, as people carry a dead man out of the city to bury him. The effects of sin have brought great sadness to the community and especially to the deceased's mother, who had no one left to care for her in this life, no one to whom she could reliably reach out to for help.

And so, the Lord God, Jesus, reaches out to her. He is moved, not with anger at sin, but with compassion for this widow and for the people of Nain. In love, He gently tells the widow, “Do not weep,” and then reaches out and takes hold of the bier holding the dead body.

It’s a reverse of the threshing floor of Nacon. God reaches out to man. Those holding the bier stop, not because they’ve stumbled, but because the Lord has stopped them. Then He speaks: “Young man, I say to you, arise.”

At this action of God, a man doesn’t fall, slain, but sits up and begins speaking, having been brought back from the dead. A son isn’t taken from his family, but restored to his mother. And the procession goes, not from joy to sadness, but from lament to joy, as the people glorify God. All of this comes from the fact that, here, man didn’t reach out to God, but God came, humbling Himself, and reached out to man. The Lord Jesus came and brought life and restoration with His touch and command.

This event outside the village of Nain shows a small picture of the greater work of Jesus, God coming to reach out to man to save him from death. The Lord witnesses our great sorrow, our sadness as death rips us apart and brings us each to the grave, and He has compassion on us.

That’s why He sent His Son. Christ came, not only to restore this dead young man to his mother, but to restore us spiritually dead children of God to our heavenly Father. He reaches out to grasp us in deepest humility. Remember, the God that struck Uzzah down for touching the ark allows Himself to be spit upon and slapped by those who were supposed to be the caretakers of His holy place. By rights, each of those Pharisees and Sadduces should have been struck down the moment they laid hands on His holy flesh.

He allows Himself to suffer for transgressions He has not done, to pay the penalty for crimes He has not committed. Unlike Uzzah and you and I, Christ committed no errors, but He allows Himself to take on the full force of God’s anger and wrath against sin. Uzzah’s father Abinidab no doubt mourned as his son lay dead next to the ark, and God the Father mourned, covering the whole world in darkness, as His Son hung upon the cross. Yet by all this, Jesus wins for us life.

This life He then gives to us as He reaches out still today. This is the wonder of the Sacraments. He doesn’t hold out His human hand and grasp us, but He still reaches out to us physically as He speaks His word.

When a baby is brought to the baptismal font, it’s like Nain all over again. The child, though happy and alive on the outside, is dead on the inside, dead in trespasses and sins. But as the procession comes here to the font, Jesus halts it, because in His compassion He desires to restore that child. And so He reaches out through water – living water – touches the child. At the same time, then, He speaks His word through the pastor and by His power brings the child to life.

Though we can’t see it with our physical eyes, spiritually, that child has been raised from death to life. I then get to give the child back to his mother, but it’s really the Lord who has given, and He has given for eternity. The widow’s son would die again, as would the widow. But those who are baptized and remain in the faith given in their baptisms are made alive and joined forever. Even death cannot separate the saints of God, for all are joined to Christ, who is the God of the living, not the dead.

We get to be in the presence of these saints when our Lord reaches out to us in the other Sacrament: Holy Communion. There, at His table, He time and time again humbles Himself and comes to us in simple bread and wine, becoming also His body and blood at His word.

We process up to His altar, with our weakness and our concerns and our sins, and He gives us Himself. Because we have been washed in Baptism and given faith in our hearts by the working of the Holy Spirit, we may hold the God of Israel in our hands, partaking of the once-for-all sacrifice whose blessing goes throughout time, and not worry about being struck dead.

The Lord reaches out, giving Himself to you, speaking His words, “This is my body, given for you.” “This is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins.” His physical presence, joined to His words, work life and healing for you just as they did for that young man outside Nain. We are still in this world filled with sin and death, but in His Supper He reaches out to us time and time again, granting forgiveness and life.

Because it is our Lord who reaches out, we have comfort even in the face of death. Without Christ, people are left grasping at straws of all sorts when facing death, either a loved one’s or their own.

They reach back into their minds for memories of good times, but then realize that memories fade, and that they can only look backward, not forward. They grasp at achievements they’ve done, deeds they’ve performed, but those just slip through the fingers as time wears them away. In desperation, some will even grasp at things like drugs or alcohol, trying to drown out the reality of death, but such destructive things only increase death, not take it away.

For those who trust in Christ, though, death has been destroyed, even made to serve Christ. As Christians, we can face death knowing that it isn’t the end, but simply the means by which Christ reaches out and brings His people into His kingdom. When a Christian closes his eyes in the sleep of death, he opens them to behold the splendor of heaven, the innumerable host of white-robed saints, and the Lord Jesus waiting there for him.

And at the Last Day, when time has run its course and the Lord draws this world to its end, our Lord will speak to His people just as He did the young man outside Nain. He will call to each of you, and to all who rest in their graves: “I say to you, arise!”

In that day, we will all be rejoined to our brothers and sisters in Christ, to the young man and his mother, to Uzzah, and to God Himself, never to be separated again. We will rejoice forever, confessing the fullness of the wonderful truth which the crowd spoke in our text: “God has visited His people!”

In the name of Jesus, amen.