

On Abundance

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text

Prayer

1 Kings 17 1-16

17Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, '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.' ²The word of the Lord came to him, saying, ³'Go from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁴You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' ⁵So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁶The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. ⁷But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ⁹'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.' ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.' ¹²But she said, 'As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.' ¹³Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.' ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Prayer

Sermon

Time and again, we see that God provides, just when we need. - Bob B

God may not show up when you expect, but God is always on time.

You pick'em up, I'll put'em down.

Prayer

Will this month be the month we can't pay all of the bills? I remember asking that question, month after month, when my mom had moved into assisted living. It was a brave thing she did, when we knew she could not live alone any more, she chose to move from Nashville to Boston, from a house to an apartment, from living on her own to assisted living. But she didn't have much money and I was a 24 year old in grad school. The first year or two the money held. The third and fourth year, each month I would look at her bank account and my bank account and I would figure out if there was another way to cut costs. I rented my car out to my housemate three days a week, I wrote to my dad's old friend, again. I would wonder, is this the month when we can't pay all of the bills? And what happens then?

“When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.’ ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ ¹²But she said, ‘As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.’”

Have you been there?

I've been talking to a lot of people lately who are trying their hardest to take care of people they love. Parents who need more and more care. Children with special needs. Spouses in crisis. But it's not just caregivers who wonder if the oil jar is empty, if they have the creativity to do their job one more day, if they can possibly put one foot in front of the other on the path up the mountain whose summit they cannot see. Folks who feel just plain done.

Which brought me to Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. Elijah was hungry and thirsty and worn out, too - not just the widow and her son. They all wondered whether they could make it to tomorrow.

How did Elijah get here? He was God's prophet and as happens so often in scripture, he was preaching to people who worshipped other gods. Elijah testified that only God - not Ba'al - could provide rain and fertile harvests. But both Elijah and the widow suffered in the drought. Widows and children were most vulnerable. No wonder this unnamed woman protested at Elijah's request - ask any parent to give away the last of a precious resource their child needs and they will say no. But Elijah's faith convinced her to practice abundance and generosity and hospitality, and by God's grace they made it through.

They participated in God's reality.¹

Bible Professor Cameron Howard observes:

"It is easy to believe in death-dealing powers, for that is what we witness in the world every day. It is much harder to imagine the power of love that conquers death."²

And this is the invitation of the good news of the text to us: to participate in God's reality. To imagine that we will make it through, one more day there will be oil and flour in the jar.

Now, I don't mean to say something simple and cliché - I don't want to minimize the struggle.

But I will say this, I will testify to this truth I've experienced in my life.

We did find the resources Mom needed, for as long as she needed them.

¹ Michael Chan, Working Preacher

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-10-3/commentary-on-1-kings-1717-24-3>

And I've heard it from so many of you, that somehow, you got through times of hardship.

I've heard more than one Pilgrim say this, but I heard it most recently from Bob, talking about the life of this church:

Time and again, we see that God provides, just when we need. - Bob B

I think God is not the only agent in that: I think we show up for each other.

Elijah and the widow and her son were hungry.

In their hunger, they became interdependent, and by God's grace they received what they needed.

Elijah was a prophet of a life-giving God, with a prophecy of hospitality, a prophecy of interdependence, a prophecy of care, a prophecy of abundance.

Elijah's prophecy to the widow - and the text's word for us - is that we are in this together, a God may not show up when you expect, but God is always on time.

It's Communion Sunday, and every month we gather at the table - gathering spiritually when we cannot gather physically - the table of abundant blessing. When we share in this communion meal, it is our proclamation of God's heavenly banquet, the jar of oil that never runs out, the loaves of bread that feed so many, the belief that some how, some way, in God's reality, there will be enough.

At the Table where there is always enough. The communion meal is one of loaves and fishes - when we think there is not enough, it turns out that there are baskets and baskets left over when we share with one another. Amen.

Prayer

Jesus disciples asked him for bread - for faith to sustain them, for wisdom, for love. 'Sir, give us this bread always.' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

And so we pray,

Jesus, give us the bread of life.

Give us hope in the midst of trouble.

Give us faith in the midst of doubt.

Give us wisdom and determination when we face setbacks.

Give us healing when we are sick - we know that sometimes healing is not physical but is the gift of solace, love, acceptance.

Give us science and good counsel when we deal with mental health challenges.

We thank you, Jesus, for those who show up: neighbors and friends and church people; scientists and first responders; the random stranger who says the most kind word.

And we thank you for your invitation, that we might show up for others. Amen.

Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. Wendell Berry.