

July 6, 2014
Psalm 107:1-9
1 Kings 17:8-16

Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath

It stopped raining. Just like Elijah had said it would. Not a drop of moisture fell in Israel. The heavens were clear. Not a cloud in the sky, for days and days. Then days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months. The crops shriveled. The cattle died. The earth was as dry as a bone. Elijah had said it would happen. He had told King Ahab when he stormed into his palace and delivered the prophetic message: ‘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.’ No rain, Elijah had said. No rain, because God was angry. Because Israel had not been faithful. Because another god had taken the Lord God’s place in their hearts. The god Baal, the so-called storm god, god of rain and harvest and prosperity. Baal, they said, would bring the rain. Baal would bring life. But Baal was not the god who could do that. And now Israel would see. And King Ahab would see. They would see who DID bring the rain and create life. By God’s word there was to be no more rain.

That's what Elijah told King Ahab. There will be no rain. And Elijah, when he told Ahab, gave no lengthy explanations for why it was happening. No lectures or justifications. He told Ahab in one simple sentence that it wasn't going to rain because Ahab knew why. Because Ahab had turned from God. Because he had systematically killed the other prophets who had spoken out. Because he was not a king after God's own heart. He was a King after his own heart. He was a king of might makes right. A king of prosperity at any cost. A king of making a killing instead of making a living. And he eliminated all who opposed him. Which may be why Elijah spoke just one sentence to the King before he turned and ran for his life.

Elijah told Ahab, there will be no rain. Because of what Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, had done. God had blessed them and sustained them and given them a land flowing with milk and honey. But it wasn't enough. Ahab wanted more. And more. More of what his neighbors had. More of what other nations had. More of what the other gods had. There was more out there. And he grew afraid and anxious that what the Lord his God had given him was not enough.

And the god Baal offered relief. Their neighbors in Phoenicia said so. Their neighbors in Sidon and Tyre said so. More was the answer to the fear and anxiety he felt. So he pursued more but when he got more-- more land, more tribute-- the 'more' was not enough. He found it was never enough. The fear and anxiety were still there. So he demanded more from others and more from the world. Just to be safe and to get a little bit more out of life. But his pursuit made life less. Enough was never enough. So God said, enough. There will be no rain. This has to stop. Ahab has to stop. His heart is as barren and as dry as a desert. And so, everything around him will become that way. Life will literally dry up. There will be no rain.

And there wasn't. Crops shriveled. Cattle died. The earth was as dry as a bone. And Elijah, the prophet, who had delivered God's word of judgment, was now on the run. Ahab would most certainly kill him if he could. So, Elijah escaped to the wilderness. But no rain fell. And the desert streams dried up. And Elijah could survive there no longer. About this time, Elijah probably wished he had opted for a different career

path. But just when all seemed lost, God directed Elijah to go the town of Zarepheth, where a widow would take care of him.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. But even so, it was a pretty crazy thing for God to do, sending Elijah to Zarepheth. Check out your map. The town of Zarepheth was not even in Israel. It was in Phoenicia on the main road between Sidon and Tyre. Right smack in the middle of enemy territory. Between Baal's hometown and Baal's vacation home. It was deep in the land of the Gentiles, the land of the unclean and the unrighteous. Desperate times call for desperate measures and God sent Elijah to a desperate, ungodly places. But who was Elijah to argue? But when you're running for your life, and running out of options, you take what you can get.

So Zarepheth it was. But even there, the drought had taken its toll.

Everything was scarce. Life had all but dried up. Fear and desperation

hung in the air. The drought was punishing everyone, not just King

Ahab. It was punishing all of creation. It was punishing even those who

barely had enough to begin with.

When Elijah saw the woman at the gate of Zarepheth, he knew she was a widow. She was gathering firewood. A woman with the security of a family would not gather firewood. Only the most desperate did a job like that. So when Elijah saw her, he knew she was a widow and that she just might be the one God had sent him to meet. So he asks her for a drink, and a bit of bread, only to find that the situation God has led him into is more complicated than he thought. There's not enough here for him. Or for her. Or for anyone. The widow doesn't even have a crust of bread for herself, let alone him. She's gathering wood to cook one last meal. "And after that," she says, "my boy and I will have no more. So if you'll excuse me, mister, I'd like to make one last supper for me and my boy so we can eat it and die."

For her, there truly was not enough. Based on what she had in her cupboards, she and her boy would not survive. And she was afraid and she was angry and she was full of grief that her life was so barren. And all she could do now was make one last stand and try to protect what little she had because there was not enough.

Perhaps we have felt like that widow. That there isn't going to be enough. That our resources are almost gone. And our reserves have just about run out. And the way things are going, we aren't really sure we will make it. We don't have enough money for everyone or time for everyone or energy for everyone. We don't have enough hope or enough patience or enough love. There isn't enough in us. And yet here comes another charitable organization, and a PTO president, and a representative from the Food Bank, and the preacher at our church, asking for yet one more thing. And we feel exhausted and anxious and afraid. Isn't it enough? Is it ever enough?

As long as we are alive, we will worry about there being enough. It's part of being human. And those of us who try to do good and be good and think about the future and take care of others, we worry. We are afraid that we don't have enough and we can't do it all. And you know what? We can't. We do not have what it takes to everything right. On our own, we cannot do miracles. We cannot fix everything. We cannot give life to the world or to others. Our resources are limited. But we believe that God's resources are unlimited. Our supplies of love and joy

might be running low. But God's supplies never run low. Living on our own power and our own strength, we will be anxious and afraid. But living on God's strength and God's power, trusting that God loves us and provides for us, then joy and hope are ours for the taking.

Listen to the first thing Elijah says to the widow. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. It's a message that comes to us over and over again in the Bible. Because fear is the enemy of faith. It is the enemy of love. It is fear that drives us from God and from one another. So we hear it again and again in the Bible, fear not. You don't have to do this on your own. Trust me, says God. Put your faith in me. Do not be afraid.

Elijah has the crazy belief that God will make sure there is enough. He knows by the word of the Lord that his fate is tied to the fate of this widow. So both Elijah and this widow, who are both out of options and out of luck, they must take a leap of faith together. Do not be afraid, he says. Go and make that last meal. But share it with me. And I promise, I promise, there will be enough. God will make sure there will be enough from here on out.

Elijah asks the widow of Zarepheth to take a leap of faith. He asks her to share what she has, even though she obviously doesn't have enough. He asks her not to be afraid, though obviously, she has a right to be. And I struggle with this. I mean, when is enough, enough? When is asking for more, too much? It's Bible stories like these that give all of us chronic givers, guilt trips. Stories like these upset those of us who mind the finances of the church. When is enough, enough? When you don't have it to give, you don't have it to give. And this widow doesn't have it to give. As far as I'm concerned, she has every reason to say no to Elijah. She has every reason to say that she cannot, in any way, afford to help him and that he should hit the road.

This a time for everything, as it says in Ecclesiastes. And there is a time when you need to say no. There is a time to refrain spending ourselves out. But there is also a time when God asks us not to be afraid. There are God-times, when God asks us not to worry about whether we will have enough. When we don't rely on our resources, but we take a leap of faith and rely on God's resources. So God can take that little bit of something we have and do something miraculous we could never do on our own.

The widow takes a leap of faith. And something miraculous happens. Her jar of meal and her jug of oil never run out. She survives more than one day. She is able to survive day after day after day. And what is even more miraculous is that she does what King Ahab was never able to do. She says no to fear and yes to faith. She says no to Baal, the god of more, the god of there isn't enough, the god of anxious living. She takes a leap and trusts that God will provide.

It's a miracle. And every day I pray that I can say no to the fear and yes to faith. I pray in the midst of changing diapers and buying groceries and paying bills and making doctor appointments. Every day, I try to remember I can't do this on my own. And I don't have to. I don't need to be afraid. God will provide. I don't need to worry about whether there will be enough, because there will be enough. And isn't that good news? It's it good news for a frantic world ruled by anxiety, where people worry if there will be enough and they grow more fearful by the minute. Shouldn't they know, shouldn't they see that there is good news. That we can tell them that God loves them and God will provide. There will be enough.

At this table, God provides. A life of hope and peace and joy. A life without fear or anxiety. And we break off a little bit of bread and we share it with one another and God does something miraculous. We can see God's love for us that extends from this world to the next. Do not be afraid. God is here. And there is enough. There is more than enough. For everyone.

I invite you to get out your craft kit.