

God Is Here
I Kings 17:8-24
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The widow of Zarephath had reached the end of her stores. There was just a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug. Throughout this drought and famine she had struggled to take care of herself and her son. But finally she was at the end. There was no more food and it didn't look like there would be any chances of finding any more. All the neighbors were in the same situation; they didn't have anything left to share either. Soon the dying would begin. First the sick and the elderly would go. Widows, who had difficulty supporting themselves, would be among the first to die. The mothers would do everything they could to keep the children alive, but finally they would reach a point where they knew that they couldn't go on. I'm sure she pondered, "Do I watch my child die first or do I let him watch me die?"

There was barely enough left for one more meal, so the widow went out to gather tender for her final fire. Everything was dead and dry, so finding tender wasn't difficult. She had planned to return home, clean the house, wash herself and the boy, build the fire, cook the meal, and then spend that evening together eating their last meal. Tomorrow they would begin to starve.

As she gathered up the tender, a man appeared. At first she was hopeful. Maybe this man brought good news or some food. But, as he came closer, she could see that he was not well-fed either. Another victim of this catastrophe. A refugee and scavenger, wandering from village to village until he too would die.

The man called out to her and asked for a drink of water. One must always be hospitable to strangers, her mother taught her, you might just be entertaining angels. So, she sat down her bundle of sticks and went to go draw water from the well. He called out again, asking for food.

She knew this was coming. She turned and told him the truth. She didn't have enough for one last meal for her and her child. They just had a handful of meal and a little oil.

Then the man spoke again,

Do not be afraid. Do as I have said. Fix me a meal and then fix one for yourselves. For thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: The jar will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until Yahweh sends rain again upon the land.

And in that moment she did as the man said. Why? She wasn't sure. Did she really believe what he had said? Or, was she at the last straw anyway, so "why not?" As she prepared the meal, she had more than she expected, and the three of them ate together.

The next day she awoke. This was the day in which she would begin to die. She lay there on her mat much later than usual, pondering where life had brought her. But then she

thought about the man's words. A little curiosity began to nag at her; the curiosity opened a little door in her soul, and she began to hope just a little, when the sheer absurdity of it all slammed the door shut.

She finally rose from her mat, pondering what to do on this day of death, when she found herself standing at the cupboard. Hurriedly, she lifted the lid of the jar and peered in and . . . it was filled with meal! She quickly grabbed the jar, pulled out the stopper and . . . it was filled with oil! And suddenly she cried out in praise, "God is good and God is able."

The man stayed on after that. He was obviously no ordinary man. He was a seer, a God-man. And, amazingly, the food did not run out.

Yet, sometime later the widow's son became ill and quickly died. This was a mockery of her praise. How dare God default upon the blessing! Distraught, agonizing this mother screamed at the seer. He had come to keep them alive to judge her sin and to take her child. She had lived too long. She had lived to see her own son die.

Then the God-man took the boy and spread himself over the boy three times, praying to God. And life entered the boy again. The man returned the boy to his mother and she said, "Now I am certain you are God's man and that Yahweh's word is in your mouth."

Almost everything you need to know about the entire biblical story is contained in this story of the widow of Zarephath. First, there's the bread. Remember with me for a moment.

The children of Israel are traveling in the wilderness and they have run out of food. They will starve. But in the morning a white, flaky, bread-like substance appears -- manna they call it. Yahweh, the God of Israel, provides.

David and his men were fleeing the wrath of King Saul and they had run out of food. They found refuge and safety in the tabernacle of the Lord. They asked the priest for food, but there was none. None except for the "bread of presence," the bread that had been offered back to God as thanksgiving. None but the priests were to touch this bread, but David and his men ate the bread of presence. Yahweh provides.

The people had come out from towns and villages to hear this new wonder worker and teacher. He had not claimed to be the messiah like so many others were doing, but, still, they wanted to see and to hear for themselves. And they stayed all day, amazed by his teaching. He spoke with an authority and a power that no other teacher had before him. It was time to leave, to go home to eat, but they wanted to stay. Suddenly there was food -- bread and fish for everyone. Jesus is good, Jesus is able.

And then he took the bread and blessed it and gave it to them and said, "This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Jesus provides.

Now, there is a second episode in this story of the widow and Elijah. Even after God provides bread, the child dies, but is restored to new life. Again, let's go deep into our scriptural memory.

Sarah laughed. She was old, really old, and she'd always been infertile. A barren womb was like a desert for her. She laughed because these men said that Yahweh God would cause her to conceive a child. Yahweh who had led her husband Abraham on these wild journeys through unknown countries. Yahweh who seemed to be more trouble than help. Yahweh

would bring life into her dry and empty womb? So, Sarah laughed. Then, on the day she gave birth to her son Isaac she exclaimed, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." For God is good, and God is able.

The poet looked out over the ruined city of Jerusalem, destroyed by the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar, the people carried into exile, and the poet sang these words,

Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from Yahweh.
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases,
your mercies do not fail,
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

In a vision Ezekiel was brought to a valley; it was full of bones and they were very dry. And God said to prophesy to the bones. So Ezekiel prophesied and suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together. The sinews and flesh came upon them and the breath filled them and they lived. Behold, God is good, and God is able.

In the morning the women gathered their things and headed to the tomb. The Sabbath was ended and it was time to prepare Jesus' body for burial. They hoped that in the last few days that his body had not decomposed too far. If so, then the task would be quite nasty. But when they arrived at the garden tomb, the stone was rolled away, and a young man sat there and said to them, "He has risen."

John of Patmos recorded his vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her spouse. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

Two images, bread and new life, that run throughout our common story, from Genesis to Revelation and continuing throughout the history of the people of faith. These images reach their climax in the life of Jesus with the feeding of the multitudes, the Last Supper, and the resurrection. And they reach their fulfillment in the vision of the reign of God where all will participate in the new heaven and the new earth and all will eat at the wedding feast of the

lamb.

Two amazing images, and they appear here together in the story of the widow of Zarephath. Why here? What's special about this situation? What is happening?

A few verses before the bible shares this story with us, it tells us about a political change in the life of the nation:

In the thirty-eighth year of King Asa of Judah, Ahab son of Omri began to reign over Israel; Ahab son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. . . . he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.

The introduction of Baal worship is Ahab's new use of religion to control the people and further his imperial agenda. Baal, the thunder and war God of the Canaanites, is much more accommodating to an imperial agenda than the story of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Think about it a minute. With what is Yahweh associated? Yahweh heard the cries of an oppressed people who cried out against their king, Pharaoh. The people cried out for justice, for freedom, and for food. And what happened? God provided all those things, and the king and his chariots were thrown into the sea. Now, if you are a king, you can't have people worshipping a god who does those things, right? I mean it's too difficult to control people if they believe in things like freedom and justice and plenty and that God will provide for them. So, let's compel people to worship some other god who doesn't do these things.

And in this crucial moment, God sends a prophet. And part of the job of the prophet is to imagine an alternative to Ahab and his imperial agenda. In these awful circumstances, can the people's hope be renewed? Will they dare to imagine?

And so in this moment of shriveled hope, we are told a story. "Once upon a time a widow . . ." A widow! One of the outcasts, one of the least of these, one of those who cries out to God for justice and liberation.

And then, there is a prophet. And he is named "Elijah." And "Elijah" means "Yahweh is my God."

And then . . . there is miraculous bread.

And then . . . there is new life.

And suddenly, we sit up, and we take notice, because in this story something is happening. Something is being imagined. Something both old and new. Something which will restore our hope and our vision. For God is here. Yahweh, who promised us freedom and abundance, is right here, among us. God is here, providing sustenance and new life, so that you can dare to imagine.

We live in a time when people are struggling with faith and spirituality. Millions reject the teachings of the churches they grew up in, though they do not want to abandon faith altogether. They have questions: Is God still speaking? Who is God? Can I trust God? Is God a judgmental jerk?

We live in a time when people's lives are controlled by economic forces beyond their ability to influence. Consumer capitalism has become its own religion with rituals and icons and idols to worship. Can we envision an alternative? Something focused on the common good? Something which liberates the individual and strengthens the community?

We live in a time of global climate change, where the lifestyle we lead is becoming increasingly unsustainable. People wonder if the good days are all in the past. Can we be resilient? Can we change the path we are on?

And we live in a time when people seem incapable of getting along, we lack tolerance for those who disagree with us, and instead of conversation all we get is shouting matches. Can we respect one another? Can we listen and learn from one another?

At First Central Congregational Church we imagine something different than the conflict, greed, and emptiness of contemporary life. We proclaim that God is inclusive and loving and liberating and still speaking. God is not a jerk.

We imagine people gathering together, inspired by thoughtful conversation about faith and personal growth, opening doors to community, and taking meaningful action in service to others.

And, we believe that this vision can change lives and make us better people. It is a vision that could change Omaha, and make it a better city. It *is* the ancient story of our faith -- that God is here, at work among us, providing sustenance and new life. And it is also our vision for the future-- dynamic, vital, progressive, always evolving.

So dare to imagine. Open yourself to possibilities and a passionate faith. For God is here. God is good, and God is able. And God will provide.