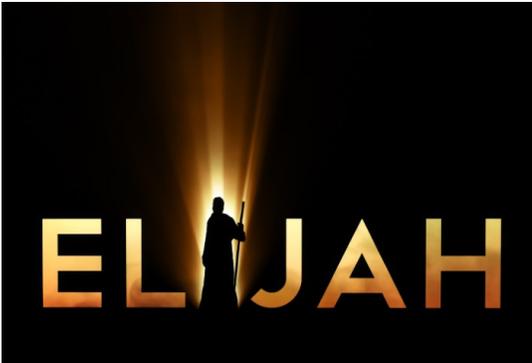


“Lessons from Elijah”
Summer Worship 2016

Texts: Luke 7:11-17
1 Kings 17:8-16

Preached: 6/5/16



Two lessons today – one from the life of Elijah, one from Jesus. Both come from odd stories involving, of all things, widows...widows – marginalized women who are vulnerable, who cannot barely help themselves, let alone anyone else, who deserve no special favor and have been overlooked by God – at least in the world’s understanding.

Elijah’s story begins right after the prophet has been told by God to leave the land of Israel. Elijah is locked in a power struggle with Israel’s King Ahab, and their fight is over the nature of God himself. Ahab has been seduced into thinking that the Canaanite god Baal is the source of rain and life on Earth. Elijah will not hear such talk. He gets right in the king’s face and makes the bold claim, “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” (v. 1).

A brave speech — the kind that can get you arrested, even executed! God knows that Ahab has a temper, so he advises Elijah to flee to the east, “hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is a water source, east of the Jordan. There God sustains Elijah with gifts of bread and meat, delivered by a flock of ravens.



Then the Lord sends the prophet to Zarephath. Two summers ago we watched a video of this story. Do you remember it. As Elijah comes to the gate of the town, he sees a most pathetic sight: a poor widow, gathering sticks. Any sympathy he might be feeling is overwhelmed by his own thirst and hunger, aggravated by the length of his journey and the drought that is now gripping the whole land. He calls to the sad woman, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” And then he adds, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”

The widow is at the end of her rope, and her response to Elijah sounds like a funeral dirge,

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.

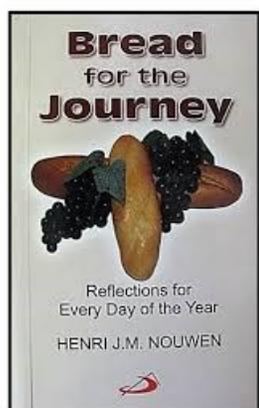
It's a depressing statement, sure enough. But Elijah will hear none of this gloomy talk. "Do not be afraid," he counsels her.



He says, "First make me a cake..." and then he speaks the word of God: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth."

She goes and does what Elijah says — a remarkable act of faith for a woman so down in the dumps, so desperate, so close to death. She trusts God's word and we know what happens -- she and her household are able to eat for many days. The jar of meal, of course, is not emptied, and the jug of oil does not fail.

Elijah teaches us that God sustains his people. The LORD doesn't just watch over hurting, desperate people, like the widow of Zarephath and her family, but he invites them to be his partners in renewing the world, taking care of prophets, showing forth the Good News that our God is a God of plentiful abundance. We celebrate that today in the sacrament of communion, where we partake of the very Bread of Heaven...the Cup of Salvation.



The late Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite spiritual writers, reiterates the lesson:

God is a god of abundance, not a god of scarcity. Jesus reveals to us God's abundance over and over again – for example the time when he offers so much bread to the people that there are twelve large baskets with leftover scraps (see John 6:5-15), or when he makes his disciples catch so many fish that their boat nearly sinks (Luke 5:1-7). God doesn't give us just enough. God gives us more than enough: more bread and fish than we can eat, more love than we dared to ask for. God is a generous giver, who truly wants to give us...life and life in abundance.

Let us look now to the other story and the next lesson – this one from the ministry of Jesus, featuring a different widow.



Jesus approached a certain town, with his disciples and a bunch of people following them. They ran into a funeral. The man who had died was his mother's only son...she must have been beside herself with grief, her only hope for protection, sustenance, well-being, lifeless on a pallet. He would soon be laid in a tomb. It was a terrible, seemingly hopeless situation.



We already know that God delights to intervene in such situations, has a special eye for people like widows, desperate, downtrodden, needy people. Jesus picks out this stricken mother. The Bible says, “he had compassion on her.”

We know what will happen, the power of Jesus’ touch, the favor God has for His people. God will provide – and God does. “Arise, young man,” Jesus says. And the dead man sat up...resurrection, new life, a second chance, hope restored...the old life is finished and gone, behold, the new life has begun. It’s the story of baptism – the new life we live is life in God. Little Jase has been touched by the baptism of Jesus, God has provided for him, little as he is, before Jase could choose God, we rejoice that God has chosen him.



The lesson here is that God makes all things new. God is the Lord of new life, second chances, restored hope. God bristles, scoffs, laughs at dead ends, loves the challenge of hopeless situations, will not be encumbered by tombs. Will we learn this lesson? Or will we be defeated by the next tomb-like circumstance in our life?

A colleague once said, “The thing about tombs is...Sometimes we don’t even know we are in them, until the light breaks from on high. But, sooner or later, we all find ourselves in a kind of tomb....What might that be for you? Is there something buried? Thought to be dead? Something that you have left for dead? What in your life might have been in such darkness that any kind of dawn would feel sudden and unexpected causing you to shield your eyes?”

Sometimes tombs are about how we treat things in our life as though they represent the end. This relationship is over. This life of faith has ended. That time of happiness will never return. There’s a big stone covering that thing I used to feel or I used to love or I used to be and... anyway, it’s started to smell of rot! That part of me is totally dead, period. End of sentence. But where we put a period ... God puts a comma.”

Having faith in the God of resurrection means that the story is seldom over when we think it is.



Today we celebrate both sacraments, which highlight our two lessons. Communion reminds us that our God is a God of abundance – sustaining us against all odds. Elijah’s encounter with the Widow of Zarephath brings it home.

Baptism reminds us that our God is a God who claims us, who chooses us, and gives us new life, even before we accept it and when we least expect it. Jesus’ encounter with the Widow of Nain reminds us again. Praise God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.